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On the Will Not to Believe and Axiological Atheism: A Reply to Cockayne and Warman

Abstract:

In a recent article in *Sophia* Joshua Cockayne and Jack Warman (forthcoming) defend a view they call supra evidential atheistic fideism. This is the idea that considerations similar to William James's defense of theistic belief can be used to justify atheistic belief. If an individual evaluates the evidence for atheism and theism as roughly the same (i.e. either can be epistemically rational), then she can rationally believe atheism if her passions lean in that direction, provided the belief in atheism is forced, live, and momentous. After outlining their defense of atheistic fideism, I offer some friendly amendments to their position. Cockayne and Warman claim that when the existential question of God's existence is undecided for someone, she is rational to let her passions answer the existential question. This is a version of Rowe's friendly atheism because it can explain the existence of religious disagreement, even in cases where an atheist and theist give the same assessment of the evidence for God's (non) existence; they disagree at the passional level, not at the evidential level. I argue for a different version of friendly atheism: A mere passion need not settle the existential question about God when the evidence can't decide it. For one might be rational in preferring that God not exist if God's existence would make things worse. For certain individuals this is reason enough to accept and act as if atheism is true, even if it isn't epistemically rational to believe that it's true.

I. Introduction

In Section II I outline Joshua Cockayne and Jack Warman's (forthcoming) recent article in *Sophia* where they defend the rationality of supra evidential atheistic fideism. This position is modified from William James and says that an individual evaluates the evidence for atheism and theism as roughly the same (i.e. either can be epistemically rational), then she can rationally believe atheism if her passions lean in that direction, provided the belief in atheism is forced, live, and momentous. Cockayne and Warman make a compelling case that James's account can be coherently applied to atheism. They should be commended for this unique and previously overlooked application of James.

In Section III I offer a number of friendly amendments to their position. Cockayne and Warman claim that when the existential question of God's existence is undecided for someone, then she is rational to let her passions answer the existential question. This is a version of Rowe's friendly atheism because it can explain the existence of religious disagreement, even in cases where an atheist and theist give the same assessment of the evidence for God's (non) existence. This is because they disagree at the passional level, not at the evidential level. I argue for a different version of friendly atheism: A mere passion need not settle the existential question about God when the evidence can't decide it. For one might be rational to accept that God does not exist if for that individual God's existence would make things worse. This is a version of friendly atheism because the theist and atheist agree on the existential question about God, but disagree on the *axiological implications* of God's existence. I conclude that this version of friendly atheism is

more palatable than Cockayne and Warman's, at least for those weary of staking the rationality of a belief on the passions.

II. Supra Evidential Atheistic Fideism

In this section I outline Cockayne and Warman's explanation and defense of supra evidential atheistic fideism. They begin by explaining that "William James's thesis, that it can sometimes be permissible to believe that p on grounds that neither support nor deny the truth of p , has typically been used as a defense of fideistic theism" (Cockayne and Warman forthcoming). According to James when a religious believer lacks sufficient evidence to believe P , but it is forced, live and momentous, she can follow her passions with respect to whether P . Cockayne and Warman argue that similar reasoning can be used to justify atheistic fideism. James endorses the ambiguity thesis which is the claim that there are instances where the evidence for P isn't conclusive and doesn't support one stance toward P 's truth value over another. When P is forced, live, and momentous, then an individual must follow her passions with respect to whether P . An option is forced when there is a set number of options and a decision must be made. For instance, whether to terminate a pregnancy is a forced decision. One cannot abstain from deciding forever since doing so ultimately results in carrying the pregnancy to term. An option is live when it has not been proven false (or impossible in the case of action). Finally, an option is momentous when the stakes are right and/or it constitutes a unique opportunity. In these Jamesian cases it is morally and epistemically permissible to let our passions decide which course to take (Cockayne and Warman forthcoming).

While James uses these ideas to defend the rationality of theistic belief, Cockayne and Warman suggest that a similar model can be used to defend the rationality of atheistic belief, at least for certain individuals. Atheism is a forced, live, and momentous option for certain individuals. This is because James suggests that, practically, agnosticism and atheism are quite similar. James says "[t]o preach scepticism to us as a duty until 'sufficient' evidence' for religion be found, is tantamount therefore to telling us, when in presence of the religious hypothesis, that to yield to our fear of its being in error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true. (James 2000/1897, pp.26-27 quoted in Cockayne and Warman forthcoming). According to James, atheism and agnosticism are equivalent in both denying the goods associated with theism.

Cockayne and Warman explain that there is a difference between holding a proposition to be true and taking a proposition to be true. Holding a proposition to be true is an involuntary attitude. Taking a proposition to be true is voluntary. Typically, one takes a belief to be true that we hold to be true. But we can take a proposition to be true without holding it to be true. Cockayne and Warman write that "[t]he agnostic seems to be an example of someone who refrains from holding it to be true that God does or does not exist, whilst taking it to be true that God does not exist" (Cockayne and Warman forthcoming).

In order to help explain this idea, Cockayne and Warman ask to consider an atheist who while at university encounters a group of students who are theists. She considers these students her intellectual peers and comes to think her evidence for atheism is not conclusive. Still she still holds

the proposition ‘God does not exist’ to be true. Yet when her theist friends invite her to church and to pray she needs to decide whether she will continue to take the proposition to be true. This forces the student into a decision. And the student knows that that there are consequences, if his friends are correct, with respect to what she takes to be true. Cockayne and Warman explain that “[f]or if [her] peers are correct, and a loving God exists who desires relationship and union with [her], and that this union makes some difference to [her] eternal existence, then [she is] forced to either deny that such a God exists or accept it” (Cockayne and Warman forthcoming). This example is intended to show that there are cases in which one must, at least with respect to practical reasoning, act as if God exists or does not exist. In cases like the one described here, practical agnosticism isn’t a possible response (Cockayne and Warman forthcoming).

One objection to this line of reasoning is the idea that one could be an agnostic and still participate in religious practice. Cockayne and Warman suggest this isn’t tenable in the long-run; at least for certain individuals it appears to be impossible to participate in religious practice while being an atheist or agnostic. It’s at least possible the decision between atheism and theism will be forced for certain individuals (Cockayne and Warman forthcoming). Finally, the decision to be an atheist can be momentous. For instance, “if the student adopts this new worldview, his moral framework, his engagement with spiritual practices, his relationship with this family and friends, and even his hopes, desires and wishes will be transformed by taking theistic belief to be true” (Cockayne and Warman forthcoming).

Cockayne and Warman suggest that the most controversial part of atheistic supra evidential fideism is the idea that atheism can be personal or passionately caused. They suggest that believing atheism is true can be morally permissible even if atheism turns out to be false (provided it is a genuine option and evidence for atheism is ambiguous) (Cockayne and Warman forthcoming). Cockayne and Warman quote a passage from Thomas Nagel as a potential example of atheistic passionate belief:

I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope that I’m right in my belief. It’s that 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. (Nagel 1997, p. 130 quoted in Cockayne and Warman forthcoming).

Nagel doesn’t cite evidence for his atheism. Indeed, Cockayne and Warman say he appears to affirm the ambiguity thesis or something similar to it. Nagel affirms atheism for passionate reasons and this is a morally and epistemically defensible. Cockayne and Warman explain that they are simply carving out logical space for atheistic fideism, even if some atheists may find it unattractive. The ambiguity thesis isn’t overly permissive because it can only justify belief in cases where the evidence is inconclusive. While many atheists are so because of the evidence, this merely isn’t the sort of person that they have in mind. They conclude by drawing a connection between their project and religious disagreement. Passionally caused atheism is less open to criticism from theists than evidentially caused atheism. Cockayne and Warman suggest there is common ground between the passionately caused atheist and passionately cause theist. Cockayne and Warman’s position is a strong version of Rowe’s friendly atheism because both the theist and atheist can agree at the evidential level about whether God exists. The disagreement is

explained by the fact that their passions differ. They are reasonable, then, to maintain their positions in the face of disagreement. This is even stronger than Rowe's version of friendly atheism since Rowe's view implies that the atheist and theist necessarily assess the evidence for God differently.

III. Axiological Atheism

I am broadly sympathetic to Cockayne and Warman's project. Their article is well-written and clearly presents a highly original thesis in attempting to apply James's Will to Believe to atheism. In this section I will draw some connections between their project and the axiology of theism. Doing so will reveal a version of friendly atheism which doesn't rely on a difference in passions. This version is based on a difference in axiological judgements about God.¹

The question Cockayne and Warman focus on is the existential question of whether God exists. The axiology of theism, on the other hand, is an emerging literature which addresses the axiological question of what value, if any, does (or would) God's existence make to the world. Pro-theism is the view that it would be good if God exists. Anti-theism, alternatively, says that it would be bad if God exists. These two general answers can be subdivided to account for God's value impact with respect to individuals (personal) or without reference to persons (impersonal), and also only with respect to certain features (narrow) or overall (wide). Thus, personal narrow anti-theism is the view that it would be better for certain individuals, in certain respects, if God did not exist. Notice, then, that this position doesn't conflict with a perhaps widely held (at least pre-reflectively) intuition that God's existence is good overall.²

It's somewhat puzzling that Cockayne and Warman quote Nagel as an example of someone with passion reasons for atheism. This is because in the axiology of theism literature the Nagel quote in question is often taken as an early statement of personal narrow anti-theism. Cockayne and Warman almost recognize this in a footnote where they say that the cause of Nagel's passion response against theism might be due to his passion commitment to autonomy, privacy, etc. But again, in the axiology of theism literature the valuing of goods such as autonomy and privacy are

¹ There are three minor worries which are not the focus of my main project. The first is that Cockayne and Warman distinguish between holding a proposition to be true (involuntary) and taking a proposition to be true (voluntary). This isn't different from the standard distinction between believing and acceptance: Belief is an involuntary attitude one takes toward a proposition. Acceptance, on the other hand, is taking a proposition to be true regardless of whether one believes it. It would have been clearer for the reader had Cockayne and Warman stuck to the standard terminology of belief and acceptance. I will use these terms in the standard way throughout the rest of the paper. The second concerns their use of 'moral permissibility' and 'epistemic permissibility'. At times, Cockayne and Warman say they're defending the epistemic and moral permissibility of atheism. At other times they only refer to the moral permissibility of atheism. The most charitable way of reading them is that epistemic and moral permissibility overlap and are in fact interchangeable terms. For Cockayne and Warman, if P is epistemically permissible to believe, then it is also morally permissible to believe P (and vice versa). Again, it would have been helpful if Cockayne and Warman were clearer on this point. In what follows I will take the epistemic and moral permissibility of believing P to be identical. The third regards the ambiguity thesis and whether two parties can ever share the same evidence, let alone evaluate it. It's also unclear whether we ever have the total evidence complicated questions like whether God exist. However, this is really a worry for James, so it isn't fair to press Cockayne and Warman on it. It's worth noting the epistemeology of disagreement addresses some of the problems concerning peerhood and evidence, and could perhaps be used to help James. Such a discussion would take us too far afield.

² There are, of course, many additional answers to the axiological question. See Kraay 2018.

taken as epistemic reasons in support of personal narrow anti-theism, rather than as the result of passionate commitments. It's true that nothing essential hinges on Cockayne and Warman's appeal to Nagel; they could simply find a different example to suit their purposes. However, for those familiar with the axiology of theism literature appealing to Nagel brings to mind a different version of friendly atheism which need not rely on the distinction between epistemic reasons and passionate reasons.

Nagel's remarks were subsequently developed by Guy Kahane (2011) into what has become known as the Meaningful Life Argument (Lougheed 2017; Penner 2015, 2018). The Meaningful Life Argument defends the idea that for certain individuals whose life is so connected to specific life pursuits which would be impossible or nonsensical if it turns out God exists, it is rational for them to prefer that God not exist. Why? Because losing out on those life pursuits would effectively make that individual's life meaningless. So Nagel shouldn't be understood as defending atheistic fideism. Rather, he should be taken to be defending an early and undeveloped version of personal narrow anti-theism. I won't elaborate on the details of the Meaningful Life Argument here. My purpose isn't to defend it. The important takeaway is that the argument arising from Nagel is intended to answer the axiological question about God, not the existential question. And it's offering epistemic reasons in support of the answer to the axiological question, not passionate reasons. Again, though none of this is incompatible with Cockayne and Warman's project, it does point to a different type of friendly atheism which some might find more palatable than the one they describe.

Fideism is sometimes associated with the idea that one should believe in the face of contradictory evidence. This clearly isn't the view Cockayne and Warman defend, something made apparent by the ambiguity thesis. Still, many will be weary of letting the passions decide what's reasonable to believe, even when they aren't believing in the face of contradictory evidence. Why might one be weary of letting the passions decide what to believe? One reason is if one accepts a view called *evidentialism*. If someone accepts evidentialism then she could not consistently endorse Cockayne and Warman's suggestion. For according to evidentialism, P is only reasonable to believe (or accept) when there is sufficient evidence for P. One's confidence that P is true should rise and fall with the evidence for P. I won't spend anymore time defending why someone might be weary of letting the passions decide what to believe (or accept). Accepting evidentialism, a view held by many philosophers, is just one way of generating the tension.

I'm now in a position to offer an alternative version of friendly atheism, which isn't dependent on the passions: If one is undecided about the existential question about God, then one could let the answer to the axiological question decide what to accept (if not believe) about the existential question. For an individual who endorses something like the Meaningful Life Argument, she is rational to *accept and hence act* as if atheism is true (even if she isn't rational to believe it). This individual isn't letting her passions decide the answer to the axiological question. She has epistemic reasons for her answer (i.e. the Meaningful Life Argument). She's simply addressing a different question from the existential question.

This account offers a different way of explaining religious disagreement in cases where the ambiguity thesis about the existential question obtains. This account will be more palatable to evidentialists and/or those who are sceptical about basing decisions on the passions. Note that I'm

not going to argue this account is more palatable for *everyone*. I'm simply claiming that for certain individuals (or which there probably are some) this account is likely more palatable. In such a case as the one I have in mind the theist and atheist can agree about the existential question (i.e. the evidence doesn't clearly support atheism or theism), and yet disagree about the answer to the axiological question. Further still, the theist and atheist could agree on the answer to the axiological question. They could both agree that narrow personal anti-theism is true and the atheist is rational to endorse it. The atheist isn't an anti-theist simply because her life pursuits (and hence meaning) isn't dependent on the truth of atheism. Thus, the pro-theist and anti-theist can possibly agree on much more with respect to the axiological question than the atheist and theist can agree on with respect to the existential question.³ This view represents a strong form of friendly atheism since there is agreement about the existential question.⁴

An example will help illustrate my idea. Suppose Susan is a philosopher who endorses evidentialism. Further suppose that she has dedicated her entire career to studying the existential question of whether God exists. Susan is an expert on the arguments for and against God's existence (ontological argument, teleological argument, moral argument, cosmological argument, religious experience argument, logical problem of evil, evidential problem of evil, divine hiddenness, religious disagreement and diversity, etc.). After years of study and careful consideration Susan comes to endorse the ambiguity thesis about the existential question about God. She thinks the evidence neither supports nor denies God's existence (and likewise, God's non-existence). Since Susan is a philosopher of religion and tries (perhaps in vain) to stay up-to-date on the current literature she reads Cockayne and Warman's new article, "On the Will Not to Believe." Susan is intrigued by the novel position they lay out. However, as an evidentialist she cannot endorse it. She thinks it's (epistemically and morally) wrong to base such a decision on the passions.

Peter is a new faculty member who has recently joined Susan's department. Susan reads some of Peter's articles and discusses various philosophical problems with him, including the existence of God. Susan comes to believe that Peter is her intellectual peer (if not superior) in philosophical matters. Peter is a theist, specifically, a Christian. He invites Susan to attend church and to pray with him. As Cockayne and Warman have observed, Susan can't really be an agnostic in this case, at least practically speaking. But she needs to decide what to do. The decision is now forced. Since Susan is an evidentialist she can't endorse supra evidential atheistic fideism. Yet Susan doesn't want God to exist and wants to act as if atheism is true. Here Susan wonders whether this wanting is rational, not merely passionate. In other words, Susan wants to know whether it is epistemically rational to prefer that God not exist. So, she is now asking the axiological question about God. Susan reads some of the axiology of theism and comes to endorse something like the Meaningful Life Argument and hence personal anti-theism. Susan declines to attend church and pray with Peter due to her *epistemic reasons* in favour of personal anti-theism.

³ Likewise, even if they disagree on the answer to the axiological question, it is a separate question whether they can reasonably disagree about it (i.e. separate from the disagreement over the existential question).

⁴ Some have suggested that anti-theism, if true, entails atheism. If this is right, then this version of friendly atheism. For this would mean that if it's rational to believe theism then it's rational to believe atheism. A more detailed version of my account of friendly atheism would have to address this worry. For example, see Schellenberg 2018.

Furthermore, when she discusses the matter with Peter she is surprised to discover that while they continue to disagree about God's existence they actually agree on what value God's existence would (or does) make. Peter thinks it would be a good thing overall if God exists, and Susan agrees. Still, Peter also recognizes that for certain individuals like Susan, whose lives would completely lose meaning if God exists, it is epistemic rationally to prefer there be no God. Because of their widespread agreement at the axiological level Peter and Susan are quite happy to remain on friendly terms. Indeed, Peter considers Susan to be a 'friendly axiological atheist'.

Of course, for certain individuals the ambiguity thesis may apply to the axiological question about God (though I think this is less likely given that the answers to the axiological question can be carefully and finely subdivided and categorized in ways unavailable to the existential question). It's easy to suppose that two philosophers like Peter and Susan end up also disagreeing about the axiological question because, say, they have fundamental metaethical disagreements. Nothing in my position commits me to denying that this could be the case. If the ambiguity thesis applies to the axiological question, then it cannot be appealed to in order to avoid the passions. If suspending judgment isn't possible because the axiological question is forced, live, and momentous then Cockayne and Warman's idea may be applicable here. For the person who lets her passions decide the axiological question and thinks God's existence would be bad, she endorses a kind of supra evidential anti-theistic fideism. If an individual's passions pushes her to think God's existence would be a bad thing, then inasmuch as Cockayne and Warman's account is applicable (and in general successful) she will be a supra evidential atheistic fideist. This might simply reduce to fideism about the existential question. Or, if the passions are appealed to with respect to the axiological question, then the position will reduce to anti-theistic fideism. The following chart helps clarify these positions:

Position	Existential Question	Axiological Question	Passions
Supra evidential atheistic fideism	Ambiguous	Irrelevant	Yes (about existential question)
Axiological Atheism	Ambiguous	Anti-Theism	No
Supra evidential anti-theistic fideism	Atheism	Ambiguous	Yes (about axiological question)
Supra evidential atheistic fideism/anti-theistic fideism	Ambiguous	Ambiguous	Yes (about both questions)

Supra evidential atheistic fideism represents the position outlined by Cockayne and Warman. The answer to the existential question is ambiguous, the axiological question is not considered, and the passions justify atheism. The university student they describe is forced into a decision since she's been invited to attend church and pray. The evidence for God is ambiguous to the student and she never considers the axiological question. Thus, she is permitted to let her passions (at the existential level) dictate her course of action.

Axiological atheism is the alternative account I've offered above. For someone like Susan, the existential question is ambiguous, but the answer to the axiological question is not. She endorses personal narrow anti-theism. Thus, the answer to the axiological question, not the passions,

justifies Susan's atheism. She has epistemic reasons for endorsing axiological atheism and so is consistent with her evidentialism.

The third alternative is supra evidential anti-theistic fideism which holds that there is no God (existential question) and that the axiological question is ambiguous. In such a case the passions could decide in favour of anti-theism (assuming Cockayne and Warman's account can apply seamlessly to the axiological question). This would, in effect, represent the reverse of Susan's position. This person is convinced the evidence with respect to the existence of God points to atheism. But she endorses the ambiguity thesis with respect to the axiological question. This position, however, would not be applicable to the university student described by Cockayne and Warman. For she would have epistemic reasons to reject the offer to attend church and pray. Still, if there is a situation in which a decision about the axiological question is forced then one could let her passions decide. We can imagine such a question being forced for someone deciding what life pursuits matter to her. But what if she is evidentialist like Susan? Here, the reverse of Susan's course of action could be recommended. This person could refer to the existential question since that is settled for her. Thus, this position could alternatively be called *existential anti-theism*. Again, the upshot of this position is that the person (who is committed to evidentialism) avoiding deferring to her passions. As with axiological atheism, nothing here commits me to the claim that this would be better for *everyone*.

Finally, when both the existential and axiological questions appear ambiguous then the passions can be appealed to with respect to either question. It's possible that in such a case the passions to each question may pull in different directions. Nothing I've said here presents an easy answer with how to deal with such a tension. If an evidentialist like Susan were to embrace the ambiguity thesis about the axiological question, in addition to the existential question, it's not clear what she should do. That the decision is forced is what causes the problem. Susan either attends church and prays with Peter or doesn't. It's unclear what an evidentialist should do in such a case. Perhaps evidentialism is neutralized as such and Susan can let passionate reasons decide regarding either question. To reiterate, I don't claim to have an easy answer to this situation.

I. Conclusion

Cockayne and Warman offer an innovative application of James's Will to Believe in order to justify atheistic belief based on the passions. When the answer to the existential question of God's existence is ambiguous and answering the question is forced, live, and momentous, the passions can justify atheism. I've shown that ambiguity about the existential question doesn't imply ambiguity about the axiological question. In certain cases an individual could justify atheism on the basis of the epistemic reasons given in favour of narrow personal anti-theism. While this needn't be appealing to everyone, it will appeal to evidentialists weary of basing decisions based on the passions. This is a strong version of friendly atheism which unlike Rowe's doesn't involve disagreement about the existential question, and unlike Cockayne and Warman's, doesn't appeal to disagreement at the passionate level. I've also shown that more positions emerge in cases where the axiological question is ambiguous. Cockayne and Warman claim to be carving out logical space for the possibility of their position. Rather than taking my reply as a direct criticism of their project, I'm also simply trying to carve out logical space for additional positions (especially for evidentialists and/or those weary of the passions). Passional considerations in favour of atheism,

along with how we should answer the axiological question about God, surely deserve more attention in the literature.

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