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The Axiological Status of Theism and Other Worldviews

Kirk Lougheed

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*For my mentor,
Klaas J. Kraay*

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Edmonton, AB, Canada

Kirk Loughheed

Praise for *The Axiological Status of Theism and Other Worldviews*

“This book makes a fine contribution to the literature on the axiology of theism. Part I provides a nice overview of the prior state of play. Part II shows that there is much more to say on behalf of anti-theism than many initially might have supposed. Part III makes an impressive start on the task of broadening the discussion to a wider range of worldviews—not merely theistic and naturalistic—and a more extensive set of issues, including, for example, questions about the axiology of authority and governance. I recommend this book to everyone interested in contemporary philosophy of religion.”

—Graham Oppy, *Professor of Philosophy, Monash University, Australia*

“Over the last ten years the axiological status of theism has become a major research program in analytic philosophy of religion. The central issue is whether the world—or individuals in the world—would (might) be worse (better) off were it true that God exists. There are an extraordinary number of ‘moving parts’ in the discussion and Lougheed provides a lucid and valuable discussion of the main points at issue, including difficult questions about coherent philosophical methodology, ethics, the

nature of value, and what constitutes a meaningful life. *The Axiology of Theism* offers a sustained and fascinating defense of a view called *anti-theism*: the view that God's existence would make the world overall worse. Lougheed adeptly addresses the most serious objections to anti-theism and provides a compelling set of arguments for the view. The book concludes with some much-needed discussion about traditional monotheistic assumptions and the value of moving the debate beyond these limitations."

—Michael Almeida, *Professor of Philosophy, University of Texas at San Antonio, USA*

Introduction

In this book, *The Last word* Thomas Nagel quips 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” (1997, 130). This seemingly innocent (and perhaps even off the cuff remark) sparked a small but steadily growing subfield in contemporary philosophy of religion. Nagel is surely expressing a desire or preference. Philosophers, however, have wanted to know whether Nagel’s position is rationally defensible. The *axiology of theism* literature explores the axiological question of what difference, if any, God’s existence does (or would) make to the world. This question is distinct from the oft-asked existential question of whether God exists. This book is about the axiological question as applied to God, and certain other religious and non-religious worldviews.

The main purposes of this book are twofold. First, I want to offer an extended defense of anti-theism, the view that God’s existence would make the world worse. My experience is that many find anti-theism to be a highly counterintuitive view and part of my motivation in writing this book is purely out of curiosity: I want to explore the best possible

defenses of anti-theism. Later we will see that ‘anti-theism’ is a catch-all for many different positions, the scope of which can be carved up in many different ways.

Second, I want to expand the current axiology of theism beyond its current focus on monotheism and naturalism. It’s impossible to do this extensively in a book this length, however, I will explore views such as ultimism, pantheism, and Buddhism in the hopes of pushing the discussion forward. I now turn to brief chapter summaries which should help the reader navigate the book.

Chapter Summaries

This book is made up of three parts. Each represents a different main theme and as such can be unified wholes on their own. Likewise, I have tried to write individual chapters that are readable on their own and not overly reliant on other chapters. Thus, individual chapters that are of particular interest to certain readers can be read on their own.

In Part I: *Setting the Stage* I summarize the current debate. Specifically, Chapter 1 consists of an overview of the current literature, with a particular emphasis on the different possible answers to the value question about God. Chapter 2 explains the Meaningful Life Argument, which is first gestured at by Kahane (2011), and subsequently developed, though ultimately rejected, by Myron A. Penner (2015, 2018). This argument aims to support the position that, for certain individuals, the world would be better if God didn’t exist since if God did exist their lives would be meaningless.

In Part II: *Arguments for Anti-Theism* I advance a series of arguments intended to support anti-theism. In Chapter 3, I develop the Privacy Argument, an argument for anti-theism originally derived from Meaningful Life Argument. This is the longest chapter in the book and the most detailed argument I offer. I argue that if God exists then God violates our privacy and inasmuch as an individual values her privacy, then a world without God is better for that individual. Kahane appears to assume that if *x* is intimately connected to one’s life pursuits, then it’s connected to one’s meaning. I offer reasons to think that Kahane

is correct about this point. Thus, if privacy is intimately connected to her life pursuits and hence meaning, then the world is better for her *overall* if God doesn't exist.

In Chapter 4, I explore arguments similar in form to the Privacy Argument but based on considerations about Autonomy and Dignity. I claim that considerations about autonomy cannot be used to support anti-theism, but they do suggest that our dignity might be violated by God's existence. In Chapter 5, I develop and defend two additional arguments for anti-theism based on the idea that if God exists then genuine sacrifice and complete understanding are impossible. I conclude this part of the book in Chapter 6 by arguing that the very best worlds are necessarily atheistic. This is because all or almost all goods associated with theism can be had in worlds where God doesn't exist (and hence in worlds where there are none of the disadvantages of theism).

In Part III: *Beyond Monotheism* I seek to push the current axiology of theism literature beyond monotheism and naturalism. I begin in Chapter 7 by assessing the axiological status of J. L. Schellenberg's ultimism. Schellenberg's ultimism is consistent with theism but does not entail it. Schellenberg argues that we should exhibit a healthy degree of skepticism about current religious traditions given that we're a relatively young species which is shown by the fact that the human species may live another billion years. The description of ultimism is much less detailed than the Judeo-Christian conception of the divine. It's thus impossible to apply many of the traditional divine attributes to what Schellenberg calls the Ultimate (at least given what we currently know about it). So the Privacy Argument, among others, cannot be used to support a position such as personal anti-ultimism. In Chapter 8, I explore the axiological status of pantheism by exploring whether some of the arguments for anti-theism can be applied to it. I do the same in Chapter 9 when I explore the axiological status of Buddhism. I conclude that much work lays ahead before drawing any axiological conclusions about these alternatives to monotheism. Finally, in Chapter 10 I conclude by showing how the relevant comparison class in the axiology of theism might be expanded by focusing on even broader questions, rather than on different specific traditions. For instance, is it better that the universe be governed? Is it better that there only be representatives of the government? Should

we want there to be expert consensus on the existence of the government? Should we wish for there to be more to come? Answering these general questions may provide us with answers to the axiological status of a wide variety of both western and non-western traditions.

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Part I

Setting the Stage



1

The Current Debate

1 Introduction

Philosophers of religion have long been concerned with the existential question of whether God exists. I take it that even those with only a tertiary knowledge of the field will agree. There has been much written on the arguments for the existence of God including the cosmological argument, ontological argument, teleological argument, and arguments from meaning and value. On the other hand, much has also been written on the arguments for the non-existence of God, including many different versions of the problem of evil (i.e. logical and evidential), and arguments from divine hiddenness. In recent years, many philosophers of religion have shifted the language about the existential question to ask whether the belief that God exists is rational. This is often paired with non-evidential approaches to religious epistemology, particularly what is known as Reformed epistemology. Likewise, analytic philosophers of religion have also explored more theologically oriented topics, including the nature of faith, worship, and the divine attributes. This book does not defend a specific answer to the existential question of whether God exists. My project is silent on this question.

This book is concerned with a different question about God (and indeed as we'll see, I want to apply this question to different conceptions of the divine too). Namely, I will be examining the axiological question of whether God has (or would have) a positive, neutral, or negative value impact on the world. What value difference does (or would) God make? This question has only recently garnered attention from philosophers. Indeed, Guy Kahane's 2011 paper, "Should We Want God to Exist" is the one that started the debate.¹ While I will explore a variety of answers to this question, I most interested with offering the strongest possible argument for anti-theism, the view that it is better for God not to exist. Thus, it's most accurate to understand this book as primarily concerned with answering the following question: what are the strongest arguments for the view that it would be better for God not to exist? I will say more about why this is my approach later. But briefly, I think this is a somewhat counterintuitive answer and that it can be quite informative to try to defend it. Doing so paves the way to see new connections between religion and ethics. After spending time answering this question I will shift focus to expanding the debate beyond monotheism.

This introductory chapter is designed to serve two purposes. First, it is meant to give a general overview of some of the issues that need to be addressed before exploring specific answers to the axiological question about God. It is not intended as an in-depth summary of the literature on the axiology of theism by including all of the arguments that have been offered for various positions. Klaas J. Kraay's (2018) chapter, "Invitation to the Axiology of Theism" provides a masterful version of such a summary and I won't repeat his work here.² Second, this chapter is intended to provide enough information (including being explicit about some of my assumptions) that the reader can take this book as a standalone work. I'm thus trying to provide enough information here that the reader doesn't need to look elsewhere in order to understand what's contained in the chapters that follow this one.

¹Rescher (1990) appears to be the first place the axiological question is raised (at least in what would be considered the contemporary literature).

²See also my Lougheed (2019).

2 What Is the Axiological Question?

At first glance it might seem that the axiological question doesn't need much by way of explanation. However, there are numerous clarifications required. These include, minimally, what sort of God one is asking the question about and whether the axiological judgments are meant to be understood as objective judgments or as preferences. I'll take each in turn.

2.1 Which God?

An issue sometimes overlooked by contemporary philosophers of religion is how solutions to certain problems change depending on which conception of God one has in view. Minimally, when I say 'God' in this book, I refer to one being who is omniscience, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. This God exists necessarily (in every possible world) and is the creator and sustainer of all that is contingent.³ This is consistent with philosophers who say they are working with a traditional, classical, or bare conception of theism.⁴ Likewise, this conception is intended to be consistent with the three major monotheistic traditions in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Thus, in the following chapters when I refer to God, I intend what I say to be consistent with the three major monotheistic traditions. I realize complex issues are lurking nearby. For instance, in Bayesian probability theory the more complicated a theory is the less likely it is to be true. If this is right, then bare theism is more likely to be true than Christian theism. Yet consider the evidential problem of evil which holds that it is more likely there are instances of gratuitous evil than that there is a God. On the assumption that the co-existence of God and gratuitous evil are incompatible then this argument shows it is more likely than not that God doesn't exist (Rowe 1979).⁵ However,

³Some contemporary philosophers of religion do deny that God is a necessary being, including Richard Swinburne.

⁴I acknowledge this is controversial depending on what one means by 'classical theism'.

⁵There is a massive literature on the evidential problem of evil I won't attempt to summarize here.

some argue that it is easier for the Christian theist than the bare theist to respond to the evidential problem of evil. This is because the Christian theist is entitled to appeal to various Christian doctrines to answer the challenge (e.g. the fall, original sin, Satan, etc.). Thus, even though Christianity is a far more complex theory than bare theism, it might be more probable than bare theism (at least with respect to the evidential problem of evil). An entire book (if not an entire life's work) could be spent analyzing how different conceptions of God interact differently with various problems in the philosophy of religion. My reason in saying all this is simply to acknowledge that this is a real phenomenon which I hope to be somewhat sensitive to throughout this book.

2.2 Objective Judgments: Worlds

Axiological judgments can be construed in a number of different ways. The most common way of understanding such judgments in the literature is that they are about *comparative* judgments about different possible worlds. These judgments are intended to be objective. Kahane says:

Which possibilities are we considering or comparing when we ask whether it would be good and better if God exists and bad, and worse, if He does not? 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 [God does not exist (or for the atheist one where God does exist)]. (Kahane 2011, 676)

Thus, the comparison in question is meant to be between a world with God and the nearest possible world without God.

2.3 Preferences

Another way of understanding the debate is that it is about individual preferences. Rational preferences are subject relative in a way that comparative judgments are not thought to be relative. Rational preferences might not always line up with objective axiological judgments. There hasn't been a large exploration of this distinction, at least in the axiology of theism literature.⁶ Consider that someone who is suicidal may recognize that the best place for her is in a psychiatric institution. It's rational for her to prefer to be there inasmuch as that's the best option for her to receive treatment for depression. However, a better state of affairs is likely one in which there are no psychiatric intuitions because they aren't needed (imagine a world where humans just don't have mental health problems). This situation is perfectly intelligible; rational preferences and objective value judgments don't always align. However, for the sake of simplicity unless I explicitly state otherwise, I will proceed as if such judgments align. However, we will see that in certain places this distinction turns out to be quite important.

3 What Are the Possible Answers to the Axiological Questions?

There are numerous answers to the axiological question about God. However, thus far the literature has focused primarily on two main answers. The first is *pro-theism*, which holds that God's existence is (or would be) good. The second is *anti-theism*, the view that God's existence is (or would be) bad. There are other less frequently explored views: Agnosticism represents the position that we currently aren't in a good epistemic position to answer the axiological question. Neutralism holds that God's existence has no value impact on the world. Finally, quietism says that the axiological question is in principle unanswerable.⁷

⁶Likewise, there hasn't been many explicit connections to decision theory (if any relevant connections are possible).

⁷See Kraay (2018) for more details.

There are further ways of subdividing the above general answers. *Wide* axiological judgments are about overall world value. *Narrow* judgments are about the value of specific states of affairs within the world. *Personal* judgments are with respect to individuals. *Impersonal* judgments are those which do not make reference to individuals. These cut across each other so there can be wide personal judgments, wide impersonal judgments, narrow personal judgments, and narrow impersonal judgments. In this book I'm most concerned with attempting to defend narrow and wide versions of personal anti-theism, the view that God's existence is worse either in certain respects or overall for certain individuals. It isn't always clear whether authors intend the 'personal' here to refer to just one specific individual, multiple individuals, or every individual. As I will later show in Part II of the book this distinction is sometimes quite important. Kraay's (2018, 9) chart helpfully clarifies the possible answers to the axiological question thus far identified:

Axiological positions					
Pro-Theism		Anti-Theism		Neutralism	Agnosticism Quietism
Theism	Impersonal	Personal			
	Narrow Wide	Narrow	Wide		
Atheism					
Agnosticism					

Each of the axiological positions can be subdivided in the same way that the pro-theism column is divided in the above chart.

4 **The Counterpossible Worry: Is the Axiological Question Intelligible?**

One commonly raised worry for the axiology of theism is based on counterpossibles. This is the sort of problem which threatens to stop any and all discussion of the axiological question about God. Kahane explains that “[t]o the extent that many philosophical positions turn out to describe... impossibilities, it might be that our evaluative questions have no answer—that theism, for example, does not really describe a genuine

alternative, an alternative that might be good or better” (2012, 36). This worry is also echoed by Daniel A. Johnson’s unduly harsh review of Kraay’s edited collection, *Does God Matter? Essays on the Axiological Consequences of Theism* (2018). Johnson writes that the contributors to this collection “are generally careful about definitions, and about side-stepping somehow the issue of the vacuous truth of counterfactuals having impossible antecedents” (2018). Johnson appears to take this as a *prima facie* reason to be sceptical of the content of the entire collections of essays.

Here’s the problem I take Johnson to have in mind: For the necessitarian theist, any conditional which has God’s non-existence as the antecedent is a counterpossible and hence trivially true. The relevant conditional here is something like: If God exists, then the world would be better (or worse, or neutral). But if God exists necessarily then any conditional with ‘God exists’ as the antecedent is trivially true. On the other hand, if necessitarian atheism is true then any conditional with “God does not exist” as the antecedent is trivially true. The thought is that no progress on the axiological question can be made if this is the case.

Another way of understanding this problem is that the theist can’t compare the value of a theistic world to an atheistic world since for the necessitarian theist atheistic worlds are metaphysically impossible. The axiological question cannot be sensibly raised in the first place. The converse, of course, is true for the (necessitarian) atheist.⁸

In what follows I’m going to briefly examine six different ways of addressing this worry. They are: (i) accepting quietism about the question; (ii) assigning value to a metaphysical impossibility; (iii) denying God’s necessity; (iv) rejecting a Lewis/Stalnaker semantics of counterpossibles; (v) using cognitive decoupling; (vi) understanding the relevant comparison as one between epistemically possible worlds. (i) through (iii) aren’t very promising for a number of reasons. But (iv) and (v) are more promising. Finally, I argue that even one rejects (i) through (v), (vi) is a very simple and uncontroversial solution. Those who put forward the

⁸One might wonder whether there really are necessitarian atheists. However, Graham Oppy (one of the foremost atheist philosophers of religion in the world) says quite clearly that he is a necessitarian atheist. See Oppy (forthcoming).

counterpossible objection as decisive would do well to consider some of the numerous solutions to it.

4.1 We Should Accept Quietism About the Axiological Question

One solution to the counterpossible problem is to simply accept that there is no sensible question here and thus we should be quietists about the axiological question. This is not so much a solution to the objection as an acceptance of its conclusion. If either necessitarian theism or necessitarian atheism is true, then there is no answer to the axiological question. Since we cannot compare God worlds to Godless worlds, we should be quietists about the axiological question. However, if we want to say something more about the axiological question, then we are still in need of a solution to the counterpossible problem. It's also worth observing that many of us seem to have intuitions quite contrary to quietism about the axiological question. Kahane notes that the type of comparative judgments required to answer the axiological question are similar to ones frequently made in discussions of the problem of evil and Pascal's wager. If these comparative judgments are *prima facie* intelligible there must be a way to respond to this worry.

4.2 We Can Assign a Value to a Metaphysical Impossibility

Another solution is to suppose that it's possible to assign a value to a metaphysical impossibility. For instance, a mathematical proof could rightly be called beautiful or elegant even if it turns out to be invalid. On the other hand, the very fact that the proof is invalid might make us sceptical about the accuracy of the aesthetic judgment. Kahane explains that "[i]f we knew that God necessarily exists, we could value His existence, and, in one sense, see it as making the world better. But we could no longer hold that it would be bad or worse if He didn't exist" (Kahane 2012, 37). This would mean that we can't make the comparative judgment between the theistic world and atheistic world that is often thought

to be the basis of the any answer to the axiological question. It seems that this option requires a lot more work in showing how comparative judgments could be made between something which is metaphysically necessary and something which is metaphysically impossible. I do not offer any such model and hence won't pursue this solution.⁹

4.3 We Should Deny God's Necessity

I mentioned earlier that I will be assuming throughout this book that God is a necessary being. Yet this isn't universally accepted, and some philosophers deny that God is necessary. On this view it's metaphysically possible for God not to exist. Hence, there are possible worlds where God doesn't exist. The relevant comparison, then, required to answer the axiological question—the one between a Godless world and God world—does not necessarily involve counterpossibles. It's simply a comparative question about possible worlds where God exists and worlds where God does not exist. Again, I won't pursue this line of response for two reasons. First, it could be considered ad hoc since I've already stipulated that I'm going to assume God is necessary. Second, I suspect that many theists will refuse to give up God's necessity and I want to find a solution that is palatable to as many people as possible. Still, for theists who deny that God is necessary the worry about counterpossibles is easily avoided.

⁹A related solution which I will not consider is that impossible worlds are indeed in some sense 'real'. There is a growing acceptance of impossible worlds amongst metaphysicians. If impossible worlds are real, then it makes perfect sense to think we can compare possible and impossible worlds.

4.4 We Should Reject a Lewis/Stalnaker Semantics of Counterpossibles

Another way to avoid the counterfactual problem is to reject a Lewis/Stalnaker interpretation of counterpossibles (Lewis 1973; Stalnaker 1987). There are, after all, alternative interpretations of counterpossibles that don't hold they're trivially true.¹⁰ It's beyond my expertise (and indeed beyond my space constraints) to wade into the debate over the correct semantics for counterpossibles in any detail. There are, however, a few brief points I wish to make regarding this solution. First, it's possible to reject a Lewis/Stalnaker semantics of counterpossibles without rejecting their entire semantics. Second, the very fact that a Lewis/Stalnaker interpretation of counterpossibles cannot make sense of the axiological question about God should count as a strike against it. For it flies in the face of (at least my own, and I suspect many others) strong intuitions that such comparisons are not only possible but ultimately intelligible. Consider that we make such comparative judgments *extremely frequently* when examining other questions in the philosophy of religion. As already mentioned, such comparisons between worlds are made when considering Pascal's wager, certain versions of the problem of evil, and the problem of divine hiddenness. It is a strike against any semantics of counterpossibles that can't make sense of these comparisons. Having said all of this, if one is insistent on maintaining a Lewis/Stalnaker semantics the sixth and final solution I examine in this subsection is compatible with it.¹¹

4.5 Cognitive Decoupling

A novel solution to the counterpossible problem has been proposed by Joshua Mugg (2016). Mugg explains that “[c]ognitive decoupling occurs when subjects extract information from a representation and perform

¹⁰Kahane also makes this observation (2012, 37).

¹¹I'm particularly grateful to the audience at the Modal Metaphysics: Issues on the (Im)Possible VII held at Slovak Metaphysical Society (Institute of Philosophy of the Slovak Academy of Sciences) in May 2019 for helpful discussion on Lewis/Stalnaker.

computations on that extracted information” (Mugg 2016, 448). Certain information is ‘screened off’ and thus not used in the reasoning process. Likewise, “[t]hose beliefs that are allowed into the reasoning process, along with suppositions, are ‘cognitively quarantined’ from the subject’s beliefs” (Mugg 2016, 448). Mugg asks us to consider the following example:

Bugs Bunny might pick up a hole off the ground and throw it on a wall. It is not metaphysically possible to pick up a hole, but we are able to suppose that Bugs has picked up the hole and recognize that Bugs can now jump through the wall. Thus, we can imagine an impossible state of affairs and make judgments about what would obtain within that state of affairs. In representing the impossible state of affairs, we screen out those beliefs that would lead to outright contradiction. (Mugg 2016, 449)

Mugg explains that when cognitive decoupling occurs “when considering a counterfactual, subjects can screen out those beliefs that (with the antecedent of the counterfactual) imply contradictions” (Mugg 2016, 449). A necessitarian theist could engage in cognitive decoupling when addressing the axiological question by screening off her belief that God exists necessarily (conversely, a necessitarian atheist could screen off her belief that God necessarily doesn’t exist).¹²

Mugg’s proposal is highly innovative in applying a theory in philosophy of mind to a problem in philosophy of religion. But his proposal leaves many questions unanswered. For instance, how do we know which beliefs to quarantine when it comes to addressing the axiological question? For it may be no easy task to quarantine, say, the belief that God necessarily exists without quarantining other beliefs about God that are relevant to the axiological comparison. Finally, why think that the thing we evaluate using cognitive decoupling is going to be relevant to making accurate evaluations in the actual world?¹³

¹²Mugg uses a non-standard account of semantics to make sense of his account. Specifically, he appeals to Kleene’s Strong System which has three values instead of only two: True, False, and Neither True nor False (which should be thought of as what’s screened off in this case). See Mugg (2016, 451–452).

¹³Many of these questions were brought to my attention by Klaas Kraay.

4.6 Epistemically Possible Worlds

The last solution I discuss appeals to epistemically possible worlds. Suppose someone rejects all of the previous solutions. Further suppose that the objector insists on maintaining a Lewis/Stalnaker semantics of counterpossibles. There is a simple and I hope non-controversial solution which satisfies these conditions. This solution says that when answering the axiological question about God the relevant comparison is one between epistemically possible worlds rather than metaphysically possible worlds. This is, I think, a solution Johnson never considers in his review of Kraay's book. And it's a solution Johnson could accept while stilling assuming counterpossibles are vacuously true.

4.6.1 Mugg and Kahane on the Epistemic Solution

Mugg briefly touches on, and rejects, what he calls an epistemic solution to the counterpossible problem. Likewise, Kahane notes that if necessitarian theism or atheism is true, then both of these positions:

[Do] not describe a genuine possibility. They describe what are at most epistemic possibilities – ways in which things might turn out to be (even to necessarily be), for all we know. These epistemic possibilities will still be open to agnostics, or even to uncertain believers. But they will be closed to those who know that some position describes an impossibility – the possibility that God exists is closed to atheists who are certain that the concept of God is incoherent. (Kahane 2012, 35 quoted in Mugg 2016, 443)

Kahane continues:

If we *knew* that God necessarily exists, we could value His existence, and, in one sense, see it as making the world better. But we could no longer hold that it would be bad or worse if He didn't exist. If this view is correct, then views and attitudes expressed by many theists (and, conversely, by