

SHOULD WE WANT GOD TO EXIST?

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Abstract. Whether God exists is a metaphysical question. But there is also a neglected evaluative question about God's existence: Should we *want* God to exist? Very many, including many atheists and agnostics, appear to think we should. Theists claim that if God didn't exist things would be far worse, and many atheists agree; they regret God's inexistence. Some remarks by Thomas Nagel suggest an opposing view: that we should want God *not* to exist. I call this view anti-theism. I explain how such view can be coherent, and why it might be correct. Anti-theism must be distinguished from the argument from evil or the denial of God goodness; it is a claim about the goodness of God's *existence*. Anti-theists must claim that it's a logical consequence of God's existence that things are worse in certain respects. The problem is that God's existence would also make things better in many ways. Given that God's existence is likely to be impersonally better overall, anti-theists face a challenge similar to that facing nonconsequentialists. I explore two ways of meeting this challenge.

I. THE GOODNESS OF GOD'S EXISTENCE

Many debate whether

(1) God exists

This is a metaphysical question, a question about what exists. But many think that it is also a question of immense importance. They think that it *matters greatly* whether (1) is true or not. Theists sometimes argue, for example, that if God doesn't exist then moral duties would no longer hold, things would not have value, or life would have no meaning. These theists claim that

(2) It would be exceedingly bad if God does not exist

This is a claim about the value of God's existence or inexistence (or, if you want, about the difference His existence would make to the overall value of possible worlds). It is not a claim about the value of *belief* in God, whether or not He does exist, nor a claim, such as that famously put forward by Pascal, about the benefits of having (or failing to have) such belief, in light of its truth or falsity.

If this value claim is true, then believers shaken by doubt would justifiably fear that their doubts are correct, or ardently hope that they be refuted. Now some theist fears may not make sense. If God is really the source of all value, and therefore if He doesn't exist nothing is good or bad, then the fact of God's inexistence couldn't be bad either. There is nothing to fear. But it would indeed

be bad if, for example, God is not the source of value but of meaning, and therefore human life in a Godless universe is inescapably meaningless.

If the inexistence of God would be bad, then His existence is presumably far better if only because the bad implications of His inexistence are averted. But of course theists also associate God's existence with a positive value claim. They hold that

(3) It would be exceedingly good if God exists

For example, many theists hold that if God exists then at least some of us would enjoy immortality and the virtuous and the vicious would always receive their just reward and punishment, and that these are very good things.

Theists believe that God's existence has these and other good consequences because, on a traditional theist understanding, it is a conceptual truth not only that God is omniscient and omnipotent but also that

(4) God is omnibenevolent and perfectly good

This claim can be understood in different ways. On virtually any plausible understanding, however, God's intrinsic goodness by itself implies that a world would be made dramatically better simply in virtue of God's existence, even if that world was already very good.

Theists, then, claim that God's existence is both intrinsically good and good through the consequences of His omnibenevolence, as well as through the bad metaethical implications His existence would avert. This is why they think it matters so much whether God exists.

Some theists think that if we could establish these value claims, this would present a problem for atheism. They think that these claims give us a reason to *believe* in God's existence. But of course this would be true only if we had independent grounds for thinking that these bad consequences do not hold, or even that they cannot hold.¹ Atheists similarly invest much effort in arguing, for example, that it's not the case that if God doesn't exist then everything is permitted and rampant libertinism must rule. Such arguments are often meant as defences of atheism, as moves in the debate with theists. But these opposing value claims really belong in a separate debate, a debate about the attitude that we should take towards God's existence or inexistence. They bear on our answer, not to the question whether God exists, but to the question whether we *should* want God to exist. This evaluative question about God's existence is almost

¹ If, for example, we *knew* that some things have value, or mustn't be done, and that nothing would have value, or be morally obligatory, if God does not exist. Kant famously endorsed a version of such an argument, although only as supporting 'practical faith'. For a straight recent version, see Copan 2003. However, for such arguments to work, it need not matter if this alleged consequence of God's inexistence is *bad* or not.

completely overlooked.

What the theist value claims give us, if correct, are reasons, not to believe that God exists, but to *prefer* God's existence to His inexistence. Now if it is good that God exists, and exceedingly bad if He does not, then we all have reason to wish that He exists. But to rationally prefer His existence to His non-existence, it is enough if a weaker comparative claim is true, that

(5) It would be far better if God exists than if He does not

To believe that, we don't need to accept (2). Because of the positive implications of God's existence, a world in which He exists might be far better than a world in which He doesn't even if the latter was itself good, and compatible with morality, value and meaning. So (5) could easily hold even if the atheist arguments against (2) succeed.

The truth of (5) turns on the comparative value of possible worlds: of worlds in which God exists (henceforth 'Godly worlds'), and worlds in which He doesn't ('Godless worlds'). 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 (1) has the opposite truth value.²

If, as some theists claim, it is a necessary truth that God exists, or if, as some atheists claim, the very concept of God is incoherent, then such attitudes towards God's existence or inexistence would be attitudes towards necessities or impossibilities. In what follows, I shall assume that we can intelligibly value necessities and impossibilities in the way implied by claims like (2) and (3) – that those who hold these views can intelligibly ask whether things would be better or worse if it turned out that they had made a mistake about the question of God's existence.³ If such valuations are confused, then so are many common remarks, attitudes and feelings. For example, when one of Dostoevsky's characters asserts that 'If God doesn't exist, everything is permitted', this is not meant to be an indifferent remark. It is supposed to be, and taken to be, a horrible and frightening implication of atheism.

Now if it is exceedingly bad if God does not exist, or at least good and better if He does, then we have strong reason to prefer God's existence to His non-existence. We *should* want God to exist. In fact, I suspect that the vast majority of

² I am grateful here to Toby Ord.

³ Sturgeon 2008 defends the intelligibility of a related question.

theists believe that God's existence is vastly preferable, not only to some naturalistic alternative, but to other supernatural alternatives as well.

II. ATHEISM AND ATTITUDES TO GOD'S EXISTENCE

Atheists deny (1). Agnostics see no good reason to believe it. But many atheists and agnostics accept (5) and (3), even (2). Endorsement of atheism is often presented as a courageous act of facing up to a harsh reality. Perhaps things are worse, even extremely bad, because God doesn't exist. But that's just the way things are, whether or not we like it. This agreement on value between theists and many atheists is often overlooked.⁴

Many atheists regret God's inexistence. The writer Julian Barnes writes, "I don't believe in God, but I miss Him."⁵ Others seem indifferent. Barnes describes asking his brother, the philosopher Jonathan Barnes, why he dismisses this line as 'soppy'. His brother replies

I suppose as a way of saying 'I don't believe there are any gods, but I wish there were (or perhaps: but I wish I do)'. I can see how someone might say something like that (try putting 'dodos' or 'yetis' for 'gods'). tho' for my part I'm quite content with the way things are.⁶

Could it really be a matter of indifference whether God exists, as Jonathan Barnes's remarks seem to imply?

We might be justified in being indifferent if we thought it impossible, or clearly false, or even just extremely improbable that God exists (contrast with the urgency of the matter for the unsettled agnostic). Even if we believed it would be far better if God had existed, we may have no good reason to consciously entertain the wish that this be so. There are many ways the world could have been better, but our occurrent desires more reasonably focus on the actual and probable.

Given Jonathan Barnes's metaphysical beliefs, perhaps he has no reason to be concerned about the value of God's existence. But now that he *has* contemplated the matter, could he really just respond with indifference? Dodos no longer exist, and it is highly improbable they would ever return, but it's not as if the world would be dramatically better if they did. Once the question has been raised,

⁴ Those who hold (2) have stronger reasons for hoping that God exists than those who think things would merely be better if He does. But this might not be true of those theists who hold that God is the source of all value. On this view, it could not be bad, or even worse, if God does not exist. Thus, ironically, many atheists have stronger reasons for hoping God exists than do many theists.

⁵ Barnes 2008, 1. See also Smart 2001, 6. One of Samuel Beckett's characters expresses this sentiment less gently when he exclaims, "The bastard! He doesn't exist!" (Beckett 2006, 119).

⁶ Barnes, 2008, 44.

indifference would be justified only if it made little or no difference whether God exists. But could it really be that His existence would not matter? That either way things would be equally good or 'on a par'? This is implausible.

Moreover, the wish that God had existed can arise simply from contemplating the actual world. We might come to believe, for example, that human life would be inherently lacking in meaning in the absence of a transcendent power – come to believe something like (2). Recognizing this, we might have reason to deeply regret the fact that God does not exist. We could have this reason even if we were certain that, as a matter of fact, God does not exist.

III. NAGEL'S HOPE

Regret and indifference do not exhaust the options. There are some atheists who not only don't want God to exist but want God *not* to exist. Thomas 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.⁷

If you believed that God is the source of value, and that God does not exist, then you would have no reason to prefer either God's existence or His non-existence. You would have no reason to prefer anything. If Nagel held this view, he could just be reporting his random psychological attitude. But Nagel is no nihilist. Presumably he thinks he is *justified* in wanting God not to exist.

I will call the view that such a wish is justified *anti-theism*.⁸ Anti-theism is not a claim about religion, or about belief in God. Some atheists think that religion is a bad thing, though this is hardly implied by the truth of atheism. But anti-theism makes no claim about religion or about the value of belief. More importantly, anti-theism and atheism are independent claims. Nagel is not a theist. But a theist *could* be an anti-theist, although this combination of views is obviously not common. Anti-theism is silent about the question of God's existence.

I suspect that most theists would find anti-theism objectionable, even blasphemous. However, when we ask whether we should to want God to exist, we cannot answer this question by appealing to *religious* reasons, at least not if these are understood to issue from God. To say that it is wrong to want God not to exist because such an attitude would be blasphemous is therefore not a good reply to our question.

⁷ Nagel 1997, 130. Nagel claims to positively fear the possibility of God's existence.

⁸ This term has been used to mean other things. The OED defines 'antitheist' as "One opposed to belief in the existence of a God." Maritain 1952 defines antitheism as "an active struggle against everything that reminds us of God." McGinn (in Miller, 2004) and Hitchens 2001 use it to refer to active resistance to religious belief, or to the view that religion is harmful.

Nagel's hope would seem perplexing, even unintelligible, to many, including many atheists. The problem with anti-theism is not that it is objectionable but that it can be hard to see how it could even be coherent, let alone true. How could anti-theism be defended? Is it even coherent? In the rest of this paper, I will try to answer these questions.

IV. WICKED GODS AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

According to a familiar argument, the existence of evil is a reason for thinking God doesn't exist. The suffering of innocents is supposed to be incompatible either with God's omnibenevolence goodness or with His omnipotence, and therefore implies that He does not exist. It is supposed to be incompatible with (4) and therefore with (1).

If you think that the problem of evil (both in this logical form, as well as in evidential forms) cannot be solved, then you have moved from a claim about the existence of evil to the claim that God does not exist. Anti-theists make a very different claim. They claim that if God exists – or, if God had existed – things would be worse. Anti-theism must be compatible with (1) and, given that (1) implies (4), it needs to also be compatible with (4), with God's supreme goodness. One thing that this means is that if anti-theism is a claim about the *actual* world, the anti-theist must assume that there *is* (or at least might plausibly be) some solution to the problem of evil in its different forms.⁹

It bears emphasizing that anti-theism in my sense is *not* the view that God is not good.¹⁰ Some Gnostics, for example, believed in a deity that is all powerful and evil. But these Gnostics are not an example of theist anti-theists. On the Gnostic view it would not be accurate to say that God exists – a supernatural being exists that is similar to God in certain respects, but not God as traditionally understood. The Gnostic view denies (4) and therefore also (1). That the existence of an evil omnipotent being would be extremely undesirable is not very surprising. But this is not what I take anti-theists to claim. Anti-theists claim, not that God *is* bad, but that it would be bad (or at least worse) if God *exists*. They claim that *despite* His supreme goodness it would be worse if He exists. God's existence must therefore be worse in a way compatible with His omnibenevolence and perfect goodness, indeed with His omniscience and

⁹ Though if you believe that existing evil is incompatible with (or gives conclusive evidence against) God's existence, and therefore endorse atheism, this needn't also drive you to anti-theism. On the contrary: you might think that if God *did* exist, innocent suffering would not occur. Given that the innocent do suffer, this might give you a reason for *wanting* God to exist: things would be better if He did. Holding (5) need not commit you to accepting things as they actually are, not unless you also believe that (1) is in fact true. (Note though that it is only the logical version of the argument from evil that directly implies that a counterfactual world in which God does exist must contain less evil.)

¹⁰ New 1993 uses 'antitheism' to refer to such a view.

omnipotence. It must be an *unavoidable logical consequence* of His very existence. It cannot be something God could be blamed for, if He does exist.

Many theists believe, not only in the existence of God but also in an afterlife. Suppose you thought that the fact of our mortality is what gives meaning to human life, or that eternal life would be unbearable. This would give you a reason for wanting these forms of theism to be false. It would not, however, give you a reason to think God's existence is itself undesirable. When some atheists present the afterlife as traditionally portrayed as extremely undesirable, or the practice of worshiping a deity as degrading, they might be groping towards anti-theism. But they might also be denying God's goodness. If God does exist and the traditional afterlife is undesirable, then how could God be supremely good if He has made such lousy cosmic arrangements? But if God really is good, and the traditional afterlife is incompatible with His goodness, then we must conclude that the traditional understanding of the afterlife is mistaken, not that God's existence would be bad. If you think that God exists and is good, but that immortality is bad, then perhaps you had better conclude that there is no afterlife, or at least that it does not last very long.

If immortality is indeed undesirable, then the possible world described by some theists might also be undesirable. But if it is constitutive of God's goodness that He is omnibenevolent and supremely good, then this could not be a genuine Godly world. So this is the wrong way to try to argue for anti-theism.

The case for anti-theism must not give us reasons for thinking that God is evil (or anything less than supremely good) and it must not collapse into the logical argument from evil – it mustn't describe a world that is bad in ways that imply that it could not be a genuine Godly world.¹¹ When these constraints are accepted, the very idea of anti-theism can seem incoherent.

V. HOW GOD'S EXISTENCE COULD MAKE THE WORLD WORSE IN CERTAIN RESPECTS

I don't know why Nagel is an anti-theist – to what he referring when he writes

¹¹ It is the logical version of the argument from evil that is relevant here, since we are considering the value of possible worlds (or apparently possible worlds), not some epistemic question. Indeed this constraint on antitheism is also operative with respect to clearly counterfactual worlds, where the question of (belief in) the actual existence of God isn't even relevant. (However, it might still be unclear whether some incompletely specified possible worlds could be genuine Godly worlds if the stipulated distribution of evil would support inductive or abductive arguments against the existence of God.) This form of the argument from evil places a *logical* constraint on candidate Godly worlds. But note that when I refer to the problem of evil in connection with the antitheist's beliefs about the *actual* world (as I briefly did above), I will also have in mind evidential versions of the argument. If *some* form of the argument of evil is taken to support atheism, then the counterfactual Godly world the antitheist needs to consider might be radically different with respect to evil from the actual one (see fn. 9). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this point.

that he doesn't want the universe to be like *that*. But I suspect Nagel has in mind something like the following. A world in which God exists is a world where human beings stand in a distinctive and inescapable relation to another person.¹² It is a world where we are the subordinates of a moral superior, a superior that deserves our allegiance and worship, and where we have been created to play a part in some divine cosmic plan.¹³ It is a world where everything about us is known and fully understood by another, a world where even our innermost thoughts and feelings are not entirely private.¹⁴ It is a world in which we are never truly alone, away from the presence and attention of another. And if the true nature of God is beyond human comprehension, it would also be a world that we can never hope to fully understand.¹⁵

The idea is that God's existence is logically incompatible with the full realization of certain values. Thus a world in which God exists is a world where we would not be the moral equals of all other rational beings – equal members of a kingdom of ends that has no ruler. Such a world seems incompatible with complete independence, or with complete privacy and genuine solitude. And it might also be a world where it would be pointless for us to strive for a complete and unqualified understanding of the universe.¹⁶

Philip Larkin wrote that "It was that verse about becoming again as a little

¹² The vast majority of theists, and many contemporary philosophers who defend theism, take God to be a person. On some views, however, God is claimed to be simple in a way that might be incompatible with literally being a person. It is possible that some of the value claims I will discuss would not make sense on such a conception.

¹³ Nagel associates his wish with a worry about 'cosmic authority'.

¹⁴ Some deny that God could know the phenomenal character of our experience – what it's like to see red or feel pain (see Mander, 2002). But this possible limit on divine omniscience has no bearing on the above concern about privacy, which is a concern about our inner thoughts and feelings being always open to divine view. Interestingly, Sartre reports that, as a child, he last felt the presence of God as a judging gaze that observed him illicitly playing with matches in the privacy of the bathroom, leading Sartre to respond with indignation to God's 'indiscretion' (1964, 102).

¹⁵ Theists have long worried about the compatibility of God's omniscience and freedom of the will (cf. Zagzebski, 2002). If the two are incompatible, then God's existence might also be incompatible with moral responsibility. This issue has been much discussed, so I will set it to one side here. But if this appearance of incompatibility is genuine it could offer further grounds for anti-theism. (Sartre's 1971 pursuit of this tension skirts anti-theism.)

¹⁶ It might be replied that, if these value claims are true, God would have to respond by restricting Himself in some way. But how, for example, could God be omniscient yet fail to know our inner thoughts and feelings? And if God is inscrutable to human understanding, could He really make himself simpler so that we would be able to understand Him? I take it that these suggestions are absurd. If they can be shown to be coherent, then perhaps God's existence would be compatible with at least some of the values I listed. This, however, would require a truly radical revision of the traditional theist conception of God.

child that caused the first sharp waning of my Christian sympathies.”¹⁷ Imagine that instead of growing up to become an independent adult, you would forever remain a child, forever under the protection of wise and loving parents. Or imagine living in a land ruled by a benevolent monarch who, although keeping constant watch over everything his subjects do, grants them extensive liberties.¹⁸ These counterfactual worlds would be better, even much better, in various respects. Yet few of us, I believe, would prefer them to the way things actually are, however imperfect. The anti-theist believes we should make a similar choice.

We can almost find a caricature of the anti-theist claims about independence in theist depictions of rebellious sinners. The damned, we are told, wilfully choose eternal darkness and torment rather than surrender to God and His love, preferring, out of irrational pride, self-rule to God’s rule.¹⁹ We can perhaps hear echoes of anti-theism when Milton’s Satan asserts that it is “better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n.”²⁰ But this is not the anti-theist view. The anti-theist is not a Nietzschean rebel. What the anti-theist holds is that it is better to serve no one in a Godless universe, than serve in a Godly one. But if God does exist, subordination is inescapable, and perhaps appropriate. To the extent that His existence is bad or worse for us, rebellion would achieve nothing. Rebellion may not even make sense. Once it is accepted that God is omnibenevolent and omniscient, it is irrational to disagree with Him.

Now very many would agree that equal moral status, independence, privacy and understanding are valuable. Of course we would still be able to enjoy a measure of all these even if God exists. But His existence places an upper limit on their realization.²¹ Some would deny that this would deprive us of any genuine good. And no doubt many theists would see the desire for complete independence or privacy or understanding to be not only a mistake but a vice, the product of arrogant pride.²² But although such a view might be associated with many forms of theism, it is not implied by the mere fact of God’s existence.

¹⁷ Larkin 1983. Larkin’s misgivings about this depiction of the afterlife are of course a bad reason for thinking God doesn’t exist. But they make perfect sense when read in an anti-theist vein.

¹⁸ This analogy shouldn’t be confused with polemic depictions of God as a ruthless ‘celestial dictator’. To repeat, the anti-theist isn’t denying God’s goodness.

¹⁹ See e.g. C. S. Lewis 1940/2002, 69-70, 75; Craig, 1991, 301.

²⁰ Milton 1674/2006, book I, line 263. See also Sartre 2000.

²¹ Though I do not intend to suggest that it is only God’s existence that would place such constraints on human good. The existence of a more limited demiurge might have the same implications, and the world might be resistant to our understanding whether or not God exists.

²² Paul Moser 2007 interprets Nagel’s wish as stemming from “human fear of losing human lordship over human decisions and life,” a “self-destructive” attitude that Moser, a theist, compares to the attitude of a wilful child. Moser takes this to be a worry about the *harm* that we might suffer if we relinquish authority over our lives to someone who does not have “our best interests at heart”. (For a similar response to Nagel, see Copan, 2006.) This is simply a misunderstanding of the antitheist worry.

Those who deny that God's existence would make things worse in these ways are disagreeing with the anti-theist not about metaphysics but about substantive matters of value. When Nagel says he wants God not to exist, the possibility he is rejecting is one where theists turn out to be right and God exists. But it couldn't be the possibility that *all* the claims of some particular religion turn out to be right. These would include many value claims Nagel rejects. If these value claims are correct, then it might be trivially true that it is good that God exists. Nagel is clearly not envisaging *this* possibility.

The above remarks are not yet an argument. They are only a sketch of how the antitheist argument might go. A complete argument would need to offer a substantive account of values such as independence and privacy, and to demonstrate that, on some common understanding of the concept of God, their full realization is incompatible with God's existence. I do not have space to provide such a complete argument. Those who do not find these values compelling will not be impressed by my remarks, but I hope that those who do now have at least a sense of how such an evaluative argument (or rather set of arguments) *could* go.

What such arguments would show if they succeed is how although

(4) God is omnibenevolent and perfectly good

It could still be the case that

(6) It would be worse *in certain respects* if God exists than if He does not

So that, trivially, a world in which He does not exist would be, at least in these respects, better, and preferable.

There is one metaethical view on which such arguments would not establish these conclusions. If God is the source of all value, then things would not be better if He did not exist, given that then there would be no values of any kind, including those incompatible with His existence. But isn't a world where nothing matters better than an extremely bad one? This is confused. A world where nothing matters is not the same as a world that has zero value. If God was the source of all value, then there would be no point of view from which to ask whether it would be good if God exists (or had existed), given that His existence would be presupposed by all evaluative questions. So even if we accepted these evaluative claims, it would make no sense to prefer that God didn't exist. But a form of anti-theism could be true even on this view. A world in which God exists would not be better or worse than the alternative, but it might still be *bad*. And if bad, it might at least give us reasons to devalue God's existence, if not to prefer the alternative. In any case, in what follows I will assume that this controversial

metaethical claim about the divine source of value is mistaken.²³

Now I expect that theists would deny that (6) is really compatible with (4). But I cannot see why. It seems entirely compatible with standard accounts of God's goodness. It is certainly compatible with God's being *wholly* and *unimprovably* good and with His being *morally flawless* and *omnibenevolent*. Furthermore, it can't be plausibly argued that, because God's existence is incompatible with, say, complete independence or privacy, then, so long as we take Him to be supremely good, this rather shows that these are not genuine values. The anti-theist's substantive value claims cannot be shown to be false simply because they are incompatible with God's existence. If this claim were true then it would seem to follow simply from this mere *conceptual* incompatibility that, say, it could not be intrinsically valuable to be a completely independent person even if God *does not* exist. This seems absurd.

VI. WHY GOD'S EXISTENCE IS PROBABLY IMPERSONALLY BETTER OVERALL

The world, I believe, would be worse in the ways I described if God exists or had existed. But this falls short of establishing anti-theism. For us to be justified in hoping that God does not exist, it is not enough that the world would be worse in certain respects if He exists. We could justify this hope if we could also show that

(7) It would be far worse *overall* if God exists than if He does not²⁴

And it might appear that (7) couldn't be compatible with God's omnibenevolence. Notice that the anti-theist argument was that God's very existence makes things worse in certain respects by making them worse for *rational beings*. And it can be argued in reply that even if we grant this claim, it would be incoherent to hold that His existence could, in this way, make things bad *overall*. Given that God exists, and rational beings exist, this evil is inescapable. But it is not unavoidable. God does not have to create rational beings. If by creating rational beings He would be creating a world that is bad overall, then surely His goodness implies that He would not create such a world. Given that we do exist, it might seem that the case for anti-theism collapses into the logical argument from evil.

²³ If an anti-theist accepted the claim that God is the source of all value, she would need to explain why God would create values that are incompatible with His existence. Two plausible explanations would not be compatible with anti-theism. On one, the answer would be that He would not and that this is evidence He does not exist. The other also answers that He would not, but takes this to be evidence that these are not genuine values.

²⁴ If God's existence is worse overall, this would have the surprising consequence that God too must be an anti-theist and regret His own existence.

This attempt to block anti-theism does not succeed. Anti-theism only requires that God's existence would make things far worse, not that it would make them positively bad. And God could still have reason to create a world which, while good overall, is far worse than the alternative Godless world. It is not as if the even better world where He does not exist is one of the possible worlds God could choose to create. (Debates over whether God must, or even did, create the best of all possible worlds would be peculiarly off key if the best world is one in which God does not even exist.)

Furthermore, this conceptual argument only applies to anti-theism regarding the actual world. Suppose that the anti-theist has shown that, if God exists, things would be bad overall and therefore God has reason not to create rational beings. Given that we actually exist, this would indeed be a reason to believe that God doesn't. But there would still be the question whether it would be better if God *does* exist. This would now be a question about the counterfactual world where no rational beings exist. Although such a world could still contain numerous contented sentient beings, I think that, if this is the comparison, many would agree that it would be better if God does not exist. So this version of the argument ends up favouring anti-theism.

Consider next another argument against anti-theism. If we are considering the possibility that God actually exists and is supremely good, then we must also assume that there is some solution to the problem of evil in its various forms. The suffering of the innocent must somehow be compatible with God's goodness – perhaps such evil is compensated by some far greater good. But if something like this solution to the problem of evil is successful, why shouldn't it also be possible for God to provide enough good to outweigh the badness of our being deprived of goods like full independence or privacy? Surely the impossibility of complete independence could not matter more than the suffering of the innocent?

These considerations would have force against anti-theists who believe that the evil in the actual world is compatible with (and does not provide conclusive evidence against) God's existence. They would have even greater force against those atheist anti-theists who deny that the problem of evil can be solved. These anti-theists need to make a claim about the badness of a *counterfactual* world where God exists and the innocents do *not* suffer. But this should make the alternative world in which God does exist even more clearly the better one, again blocking the anti-theist argument.

This second argument seems to me more successful. And considered alongside the good added to a world by God's own existence and the many good consequences of His existence, it suggests to me that it is very likely that a world in which God exists is significantly better overall than the alternative,²⁵ although

²⁵ A created world might be more valuable in yet another way. If, as Nozick 1981 has suggested, wholes that possess greater organic unity and internal complexity are more valuable, then a designed world created according to a master plan would be more valuable than a purposeless world governed by arbitrary natural laws.

these are not calculations we can pretend to make with any great confidence.²⁶

It might be possible to resist this conclusion if we took a different view of the relative badness of, say, suffering and lack of independence. Imagine, for example, radical Nietzscheans who see complete independence and self-sufficiency as supreme (perhaps even lexically prior) values not because they think “God is dead”, but on independent grounds.²⁷ These Nietzscheans are unlikely to see divine justice as much of a compensation for the privation on them imposed by God’s existence. I take it, though, that few of us are Nietzscheans in this sense. In any case, if these Nietzscheans were right about value *and* believed God exists and is good, then should not God’s goodness be precisely *Nietzschean* goodness – would not God Himself have to exemplify the Nietzschean virtues of, say, independence, creation and power to such an astounding extent that a world in which He exists would still be supremely good?

So we do not yet have a case for anti-theism. I have argued that, because God’s existence makes things worse in certain respects, we cannot prefer God’s existence without reservation. If you believe God does exist, you should also feel a touch of regret; if you believe He doesn’t, you should feel at least some relief. This is already a surprising result. But it is a far cry from Nagel’s confident contrary wish.

VII. ANTI-THEISM FROM THE PERSONAL STANDPOINT

When considered from an impersonal standpoint, it is probably overall good, and better, that God exists (is this really surprising given that the standpoint of the universe is, essentially, a God’s-eye view of things?). And this means that anti-theism’s prospects are better if it is understood as a claim made from the *personal* standpoint – a claim compatible with the impersonal goodness of God’s existence. The preference that God not exist would be justified, then, by the claim that

(8) It would be far worse *for me* if God exists than if He does not

Personal anti-theism is in one sense easier to defend than the impersonal variant. Theists might deny that (4) is even compatible with (7). But they cannot seriously deny that God’s existence is compatible with *particular* persons suffering grievous harm, or, given common theist views about the fate of the

²⁶ If we cannot reach a comparative estimate even after serious reflection, then indifference to the question of God’s existence might be justified – not because things would have equal value either way, but because we cannot say what difference His existence would make.

²⁷ Note that although Nietzsche is sometimes taken to defend something close to rational egoism, these imaginary Nietzscheans would have to be consequentialists.

wicked, deny that it is compatible with persons living what are overall very bad lives. So it cannot be seriously argued that (8) is not even coherent.

This however establishes little. If the wicked would be doomed to eternal hell fire if God existed, they would have an obvious self-interested reason for wanting God not to exist. Indeed, if atheists would be doomed to eternal hell fire if God existed, then all atheists would have a self-interested reason for wanting God not to exist. Anti-theism, however, would not be an interesting view if this was the most that could be said in its favour – it would be no different than the wish of a prisoner on death row for a horrible disaster that, although sending many to their graves, would prevent or postpone his execution. When Nagel writes that he hopes there is no God, this is presumably not what motivates his wish.

The wish that God not exist needs to be supported by more than pure self-interest. It needs to be a wish that passes *moral* scrutiny. If God's existence makes some person's life worse overall, this mustn't be because that person *deserves* this consequence. Now the anti-theist wish might pass moral scrutiny if the anti-theist could show that God's existence places an unreasonable burden on human good – that it is *too demanding*. Suppose, for example, that only in a world where God does not exist can we be fully independent, or enjoy complete privacy. The anti-theist could try to argue that the loss of such goods is too demanding – so demanding that we could reasonably prefer God not to exist, even if this would also make the world significantly worse. Anti-theism might also be defended on Kantian grounds. The very existence of God might compromise our dignity as rational beings. God would be blameless for this compromise of dignity, but there is nothing mysterious about that. It is easy to imagine circumstances where another's presence and attention cannot be avoided, and privacy is thereby extinguished, yet at no one's fault.

When considering these anti-theist suggestions, we should first ask whether this loss of good or affront to our dignity would really make our lives worse overall. Those who believe that death is a great evil might disagree, at least once we bracket the prospect of a one-way ticket to hell. Many believe that the afterlife, if not spent in hell, would be a very great benefit – a point Pascal hoped to exploit when he proposed his wager. But Nagel's wish seems to commit him to a preference for annihilation in a Godless universe over immortality in a Godly universe. Some theists argue that the suffering and injustice humans endure in their Earthly lives would be more than amply compensated by the benefits they will enjoy in the afterlife. This claim is part of their reply to the problem of evil. Now this reply has far less force in our case, given that the harms implied by God's existence will not end when we die. Those who enjoy immortality will have to endure them forever. But I suspect that for many people the benefits of an afterlife would still easily outweigh these harms.

It might be replied that the anti-theist preference that God not exist is compatible with belief in the goodness of, say, the afterlife, or immortality, or

supernatural justice, or mystical experience. For you can be an anti-theist and still wish, for example, that the wicked get what they deserve – perhaps through some impersonal Karmic force. The anti-theist prefers God’s non-existence to His existence, but this needn’t mean that he believes that a universe in which naturalism is true is best. Perhaps the best world is one created by a benevolent but limited demiurge. So those who prefer immortality in a Godly world over eventual annihilation can still prefer immortality in a Godless universe over immortality in a Godly universe, let alone over annihilation in a Godly one. I take it, however, that when Nagel prefers God’s inexistence to His existence, he is rejecting the theist’s Godly world in favour of a naturalist world, not a Godless supernatural one. And I suspect that, because of the promise of an afterlife and other divine benefits, many would not follow him.²⁸

So many would doubt that God’s existence would be personally bad for us overall, or bad enough so as to be too demanding. Still, one does not need to be a radical Nietzschean to reject this view. It can be reasonable to reject, for example, the benefits of immortality if they entail eternal servitude. So the case for personal anti-theism remains open.

The first challenge to personal anti-theism was made on substantive evaluative grounds. But this form of anti-theism might also face a conceptual challenge. Consider God’s reasons for creating rational beings. We are assuming now that a Godly world that contains rational beings is impersonally better than one which does not. Would God have reason to create such a world even if in such a world the lives of rational beings would go badly? God would have these reasons if consequentialism is true. But it’s unclear whether personal antitheism as now conceived is compatible with consequentialism. After all, our personal antitheist claims that he is morally justified in rejecting what is impersonally a better world because it would be personally too demanding. Although this is a claim about preference rather than action, it is a close sibling of non-consequentialism. To the extent that the personal antitheist is committed to the falsity of consequentialism (which of course might also be rejected on independent grounds), then surely God, who is good and omniscient, cannot be a consequentialist either. So God might prevent harm from befalling some innocent persons even if this leads to a worse overall outcome. And this would mean either that the personal harm due to God’s existence could not be grave, or that God would not have created rational beings if their lives would inevitably go badly, even if the resulting world was better overall. The anti-theist case is again at risk of collapsing into the logical argument from evil. Personal anti-theism might not even be coherent.

²⁸ Moser 2007 comes close to making this objection when he complains that “Nagel is willing to sacrifice something good for himself and others (namely, lastingly good life) for the sake of a wilful desire to be morally independent of God.” He adds that because “God is all-loving (as God is by title), this wilful attitude is dangerously misguided.” This last remark misunderstands the anti-theist position (see fn. 22).

Finally, personal anti-theism can be challenged on moral grounds. It might be argued that, even if losing a degree of independence or solitude would make our lives significantly worse, it would not be too demanding to accept this sacrifice for the sake of a world where, say, the wicked and virtuous eventually get their just deserts. And similar remarks apply to the Kantian version of the argument. Given the great goods at stake, perhaps we *should* be willing to endure a measure of indignity. This could be true even if we understood the Kantian considerations about dignity to refer, not to *harm*, but to *deontological* constraints on what we can be morally expected to hope for. After all, most Kantians concede that deontological prerogatives would be defeated when a certain threshold of impartial good is crossed. Given God's goodness, and the vast expanses of space and time through which it can operate, can we reasonably believe that such a threshold would not be crossed? Although this last point has some force, it might cut both ways. After all, similar considerations could also support God's choosing to create a world that is impersonally better *even* if very bad for rational beings.

These evaluative, conceptual and moral considerations against personal anti-theism seem to me considerable if inconclusive. But there is a version of personal anti-theism that doesn't require us to add up personal harm, or to weigh such harm against the greater good.

The suggestion that theism might be too demanding was of course modelled on a familiar objection to utilitarianism.²⁹ Bernard Williams famously made a related objection to utilitarianism: he argued that it unreasonably requires us to sacrifice what gives our life its point.³⁰ It might be that certain projects give our life its meaning and because of this it cannot be reasonable to ask us to give them up. If we did, we would no longer have a reason to live, perhaps no reason to do anything – including to care about morality.³¹

Theism might be too demanding in this second sense. 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 subordinated to a superior being, certain kinds of life plans, aspirations, and projects cannot make sense. I suspect that certain *actual* life plans, aspirations, and projects that revolve around these values *do not* make

²⁹ Though note that when it is said that utilitarianism is too demanding, what is usually meant is that morality would be too demanding on the utilitarian view, and therefore utilitarianism is *false*. We are considering a different claim: the suggestion that, *if* theism *is* true, that would be too demanding.

³⁰ Smart and Williams, 1983, 153; Williams, 1981, 14.

³¹ This is how Susan Wolf develops the objection (1997, 299–315).

sense, if the world *is* like that. (Compare: many life plans are incompatible with childhood. If it becomes clear that, contrary to appearance, there is no escape from childhood, then many lives would become absurd and pointless. And discovering that this childhood is eternal would make things worse, not better. As Williams reminds us, immortality is useless if one's life has no meaning.³²) Theists sometime claim that if God does not exist, life has no meaning. I am now suggesting that if God does exist, the life of at least some would lose its meaning.³³

Of course this outcome wouldn't be averted if God were to hide Himself—say if He were to hide Himself only from those who would, in this way, be most grievously hurt by His existence. This wouldn't help. It would only give these persons the illusion that certain values can be realized—that their lives have meaning.

This, I believe, is the strongest defence of Nagel's wish. Not all lives are shaped around the aforementioned values, nor need they be. So although God's existence would make the lives of all rational beings worse in certain respects, it is only the lives of some, perhaps only of relatively few, that would be made absurd by His existence. But for the anti-theist to wish that God not exist it is enough if these values play this constitutive role in *his* life.

Even this form of anti-theism might not be ultimately stable. I have just rejected the suggestion that God might have reason to hide His existence from at least some persons because His existence would undermine their life projects. But there is something to be said for a suggestion in the *opposite* direction. If such life projects are not rationally mandatory, then anti-theism would lose its support if people did not adopt them. But it's plausible that a main reason why people adopt such projects is that they do not believe God exists.³⁴ (Can the value of, say, privacy or independence be fully appreciated in the shadow of the belief in the constant presence and authority of God? Perhaps the decline of religious belief in the West is what has made it possible for us to fully appreciate certain values—values that would be compromised precisely if religious belief *is* correct.)

But if God exists but does not make His existence evident to all, then anti-theism is only made true by God's choice. It is God who makes it reasonable for at least some people to rationally prefer Him not to exist. Although God is blameless for being incompatible with the full realization of certain values, He would not be blameless for not preventing people from shaping their lives around these values. Given that some people have shaped their lives in this way, this might itself be one reason for thinking God does not exist. So even this

³² Williams, 1973.

³³ Would God have reason to create rational beings if some, even only a few, would lead meaningless lives? It is hard to answer this question. Many more rational beings might lead very good lives.

³⁴ This would be one explanation of why it is so hard to find anti-theist theists.

variant of anti-theism may ultimately collapse into the argument from evil. Whether this is so would depend on whether the life projects that would be undermined by God's existence are really only optional; on whether persons would not (and do not) adopt such life projects even in light of belief in God (think again of a Nietzsche or a Lucifer); and finally on whether the absurdity afflicting those who adopt such life projects in a Godly world is outweighed by whatever other reasons God has for remaining hidden.

Moreover, even if this version of anti-theism does collapse into the argument from evil, we could then still ask how anti-theism fares with respect to the counterfactual world where God *does* reveal Himself. This needs to be a world that contains the very same person whose life would have been rendered meaningless if God actually existed. We can imagine that in that alternative world, this person would be leading a flourishing life. But the anti-theist can reply that this person's counterfactual psychology would be so utterly different that it would no longer sustain relations of prudential concern. If so, then the anti-theist case can still stand.

VIII. CONCLUSION

My question was whether we should want God to exist. This question is not often considered, but I believe that it is a question all of us should ask, regardless of whether we are theists, atheists or agnostics. When people ask, or debate, whether God exists, surely some implicit assumption about this further question is lurking in the shadows.

It is possible that my question is not often raised simply because many find an affirmative answer obvious. And Nagel's contrary hope that God not exist can seem preposterous if even coherent. Theists sometimes think that atheists are not merely making a cognitive error, but are actively resisting a great good. Whatever the merit of that charge, anti-theism can seem to involve the peculiar rejection of a great good; anti-theism might be a vice even if atheism is true. (It is one thing to hold that utopia is impracticable, even to think that what appears to some a utopia would in fact be a hell; it is quite another to recoil from the very possibility of a great good.)

In this paper, I have tried to show how Nagel's hope can be, not only coherent, but also justified. This involved two steps. I first tried to show how even if it is granted that God is omnibenevolent and supremely good, it can still be the case that a world in which He exists is worse in various respects, compared to the Godless alternative, by making things worse for rational beings. This step of the argument revolves around several value claims that some would no doubt reject. But even if this step is granted, something further would be needed to justify the anti-theist wish. I've suggested that it is improbable that a Godly world is a worse one, overall. Anti-theism is thus best understood as a claim made from the personal standpoint. We could defend it either by showing

that God's existence would make such demands on our good that it would not be reasonable to expect us to prefer it, or, more promisingly, by showing that it would undermine the life projects that give meaning to the lives of at least some of us. The brunt of the argument for anti-theism would need to be carried through by substantive evaluative theorising, but for obvious reasons I have focused here mostly on structural constraints on the anti-theist project. All of these forms of anti-theism face formidable challenges. 'Pro-theism' is protean, and anti-theism often skirts incoherence. But Nagel's hope is intelligible, and could well be correct. I do not pretend to have given conclusive grounds for hoping that God does not exist. I do think, however, that I have given enough reason for doubting that we should want God to exist.

Nagel's hope is an attitude towards the possibility of God's existence. Even if anti-theism is correct, it is a separate question what attitude we should take towards God Himself, should He exist. Arguments against God's goodness might support a moral complaint against God, if He (or rather His amoral or malevolent double) does exist. They might support rebellion against that supernatural being or at least refusal to worship it. But anti-theism need not imply any such thing. The anti-theist does not reject God, nor His goodness. God is (would be) blameless for the incompatibility of His existence with certain values. If we have a duty to worship God, the truth of anti-theism may not release us from this duty.³⁵

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³⁵ I have greatly benefited from conversations with Edward Kanterian, and from written comments by Nick Shackel, Timothy Chan and an anonymous reviewer. I also benefited from suggestions by Toby Ord and an audience at Oxford University.

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