

IS ANTI-THEISM INCOHERENT?

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Abstract. Anti-theists argue that the world, or our lives, would be overall worse if God exists because God's existence imposes distinctive downsides. Many hold, however, that anti-theism is incoherent if we assume that God would not permit gratuitous evil to occur. This is because that would entail that any alleged downsides of God's existence would be permitted only if they are necessary to bring about a greater good or to prevent an even greater evil. I will argue that this emerging consensus is mistaken: the argument from the principle of non-gratuitous evil to the falsity of anti-theism is invalid because it trades on an ambiguity. Appealing directly to God's perfect goodness fails for similar reasons. Anti-theism can therefore only be rejected via substantive axiological debate.

1. INTRODUCTION

God is good, but would it be good if God exists? Or put slightly more precisely,

Would it be better or worse if God exists (or had existed)?

This is the question that the axiology of theism attempts to answer. The key debate is between *pro-theists*, who hold that God's existence would make things better, and *anti-theists*, who hold that it would make things worse (one can also be an *indifferentist*, holding that God's existence would make things neither better nor worse).

When we ask whether God's existence would make things better or worse, we might understand this question in *impersonal* terms: as a question about the difference God's existence would make to value of the world as a whole. We can also understand it in *personal* term, as a question about the difference God's existence would make to the value of our lives. It is thus possible to be, for example, both an impersonal pro-theist and a personal anti-theist: holding that God's existence makes the world as a whole better while also being worse for (at least some of) us. Finally, these pro- and anti-theist claims can be understood in a *narrow* sense, as claims about different specific respects in which God's existence may make a difference to personal and impersonal value, and in a *wide* or all-things-considered sense, as claims about the *overall* difference to value that God's existence would make—after all, God's existence may have various downsides while still making things overall much better than the alternative.¹

If we conceive of God as supremely good, as well as omniscient and omnipotent, then the anti-theist claim that God's existence would make things worse can seem deeply puzzling. In past work, however, I have argued that even a supremely good God can make things worse in various respects. For example, because God is omniscient then if He exists then none of us can enjoy full privacy. And I have argued that in a world in which God exists we can never be genuinely independent or enjoy full moral equality—as opposed to being deeply dependent subordinates who are here to play their part in God's cosmic plan. God's existence would also make it impossible for us to fully understand the universe. Finally, I have also argued that, for these reasons, some lives will actually be *less* meaningful in a world in which God exists. These are just examples of the kind of substantive arguments about value that anti-theists put forward. Since my focus in this article will be on arguments that purport to avoid such substantive axiological moves, I will set aside here the details of these and other possible anti-theist arguments.²

Note that when anti-theists put forward such arguments, they are not claiming that God is morally bad, acts wrongly, or is blameworthy for these unwelcome outcomes. Such claims would be straightforwardly inconsistent with God's perfect moral goodness. Rather, they

claim that some necessary attribute of God—e.g. His omniscience, in the case of privacy—entails some bad upshot, or a loss of good. Since God cannot help being omniscient, since God doesn't *do* anything to violate our privacy, He doesn't act wrongly (indeed, doesn't act at all) in knowing our innermost lives, and therefore cannot be blamed for it; as we shall, however, there is a sense in which God may nevertheless still be indirectly responsible for such outcomes.

Now, on their own, these arguments can only support 'narrow' anti-theist conclusions—they can only show that God's existence makes things worse in certain respects. But anti-theists often also aim to establish the 'wide' anti-theist claim that

God's existence makes things worse *overall*, whether impersonally or for at least some persons.

To defend this more ambitious claim, anti-theists must identify all the different ways in which God's existence makes things worse, compare them to the different ways in which His existence makes things better, and show that the negatives outweigh the positives.

An emerging consensus in this debate is this more ambitious task is impossible—that wide anti-theism is simply incoherent. It is now widely held that whether or not anti-theists can succeed in showing that God's existence makes things, or lives, worse in certain respects, we can know a priori, *simply by reflecting on the concept of God*—i.e. without appealing to any substantive value claims—that wide antitheism is false. This 'value-neutrality' is important since to assess both the specific anti-theist considerations, and how, if successful, they stack up versus God's many positives, we need to engage in difficult substantive axiological debate—does privacy really matter, and in what sense, and if it does, how important is it versus, say, heavenly bliss? But if there is a formal argument that shows wide anti-theism to be incoherent, we do not need to get our feet dirty in this way. That would be fortunate since such substantive disagreements are bound to be difficult to resolve.

The incoherence of wide anti-theism is supposed to follow from a principle that is familiar from discussion of the *Argument from Evil*. It is very widely accepted that

Non-Gratuitous Evil (NGE). God will permit an evil to occur only if it is non-gratuitous.³

When Kraay and Dragos (henceforth, K&D) first argued for the incoherence of wide anti-theism, their target was only its *impersonal* form.⁴ But others have since suggested that it can be fairly easily extended to cover wide personal anti-theism as well.⁵ As noted above, it is now widely assumed—even by those broadly sympathetic to anti-theist sentiments—that what I will call the *Formal Argument from Non-Gratuitous Evil* is, as Betenson writes "entirely conclusive".⁶ As Betenson writes, "when anti-theism comes into contact with the debate concerning the problem of evil, its reasons must be seen to collapse",⁷ and this is why "anti-theism, understood as the judgement that God's existence makes the world worse, will always fail."⁸ And Wielenberg similarly writes that "since God's existence entails the non-existence of gratuitous evil, any evil that is a consequence of God's existence will not make the world worse overall".⁹ If this is right then perhaps we can close the debate about the axiology of theism, or at least redefine anti-theism as a view about attitudes to God rather than about value.¹⁰

Since this argument appeals to a core assumption of the *Argument from Evil*, it has the ironic result that atheists, who are most likely to be receptive to anti-theist sentiments, seem *especially* committed to the falsity of anti-theism—and perhaps even to the truth of pro-theism.¹¹

As we shall see, the *Formal Argument from Non-Gratuitous Evil* has wider significance. If successful, it will not only show that a world in which God exists must be overall better than the "pitilessly indifferent"¹² universe assumed by naturalist atheists—an easy victory, one may think. It will also show that theism has axiological primacy over *all* conceivable

worldviews: God's existence *must* be better than, or at worst equal, to *any* conceivable alternative.

I shall argue, however, that the emerging consensus is mistaken and that *the Formal Argument from Non-Gratuitous Evil* is invalid because it trades on a modal ambiguity. Sidestepping NGE, I will further argue that attempting to directly appeal to God's supreme goodness to show that any downsides associated with His existence must be fully compensated fails for similar reasons. Wide anti-theism is therefore coherent.¹³ To reject it, we cannot avoid engaging in substantive axiological debate.

2. GODS AND ATHEISMS

Before we can compare God's existence with His non-existence, we need to clarify what we are considering on either side. A great deal turns on how we conceive of God. In what follows, I'll assume a familiar understanding of God as supernatural being who is a person, and who is essentially omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly good, and is the creator and sustainer of all that contingently exists.¹⁴

The space of options on the atheist side is wider—both in their concrete content as well as in their axiological properties, given that here we have none of the constraints placed, on the theist side, by God's perfect goodness, omnipotence and omniscience. Atheist worlds thus include idealist ones composed only of pure spirit, worlds ruled by the Olympian gods, hellish worlds or ones empty of any sentient beings, etc. So to which of these possible atheist world are we comparing God's existence?

In discussion of the axiology of theism, it is common to assume that the most relevant comparison is between the way things would be if typical actual atheists are right, versus the way they would be if typical actual theists are right.¹⁵ So we hold fixed all the aspects of the actual world that most closely overlap between the two views, and then ask whether we would get a better world if we completed this picture along theist lines or atheist ones. On the atheist side, this means that the universe we are considering is the naturalist one assumed by most serious contemporary atheists. On the theist side, this means a broadly similar universe—i.e. the one described by modern physics, not by, say, Aristotle—but one that was created by and is presided over by God, and which also includes whatever else would be entailed by that (e.g. heaven and, perhaps, hell).

Notice, however, that this contrast has a rather narrow focus—it compares one possible theist world to just one possible atheist one. Even if we conclude that the theist 'completion' of the actual world is superior to its naturalist atheist alternative, it would be highly misleading to announce, without qualification, that it would be better if God exists if, at the same time, most *counterfactual atheist* alternatives were superior to that theist world. Conversely, while we enjoy a measure of inner privacy in the actual world, if God doesn't exist, it's easy to conceive of godless worlds where this isn't the case. So we need to be explicit about the *modal scope* of the axiological claims we are making. In particular, I wish to highlight an especially strong form of pro-theism:

Supreme Pro-Theism. For all possible worlds, *any* possibility in which God exists is overall better than *all* the possibilities in which He doesn't.

I suspect that many theists will want to defend this much stronger claim, rather than just standard pro-theism: they will want to defend the claim that, whether or not theism is true, it describes *the best of all possible metaphysical systems*.¹⁶ The argument I will turn to next would come close to establishing that theism has such axiological primacy—if it is successful.

3. THE FORMAL ARGUMENT FROM NO GRATUITOUS EVIL

In an important paper, Kraay and Dragos (K&D) raise a range of objections to anti-theism. Here I will focus only on their key argument: an argument to the effect that God's existence *must* always be overall better than the alternative. K&D's specific target is what they call 'wide' impersonal anti-theism, the view that

For each theistic world which is sufficiently similar to the actual world in the relevant ways, all else equal, the 'axiological downsides' of God's existence suffice to make that world far worse overall than it would otherwise be, on naturalism.¹⁷

K&D argue that we can know, prior to considering any substantive value claim, that *if* God exists, things *must* be overall better than the alternative. Even if God's existence has some downsides these *must* be outweighed by the positives. This simply follows, K&D argue, from the widely accepted principle of **No Gratuitous Evil (NGE)**, which they flesh out as follows:

"while it may be morally acceptable for God to permit some evil to occur, God cannot permit any gratuitous evil to occur: on theism, any evil that occurs is permitted either for the sake of obtaining a sufficiently significant, otherwise-unobtainable good, or for the sake of preventing a sufficiently significant, otherwise-unpreventable evil."¹⁸

K&D write that NGE is not an "ad hoc expansion" of bare theism but "a logical consequence of the essential divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness". They are correct, of course, to say that it's not ad hoc. But it isn't a mere logical consequence of God's being perfectly good. NGE makes a substantive moral claim about *what it is* to be perfectly morally good—a claim that, for example, an ethical egoist can intelligibly deny. But since this is a plausible enough moral claim, it is enough, for our purposes, that K&D's argument doesn't require us to directly address the specific value claims made by anti-theists.

Now NGE involves a deontic claim, a claim about what is morally permissible for God to do, as well as a claim about what God *would* do if He exists. NGE does have axiological implications, since it says that God would allow evil only if that's necessary to bring about a sufficiently significant good or prevent a sufficiently significant evil. But for NGE to do the work that K&D want it to do, it's not enough that the relevant good/evil is *sufficiently significant*—it needs to be equal or greater to the evil that is permitted. I will assume that this is what K&D have in mind. Moreover, since it seems hard to justify allowing a significant evil simply to prevent an evil that is just as bad or a good that would be entirely offset by the permitted evil, I'll assume the stronger claim that God will permit an evil only to prevent an even greater one, or to bring about a greater good. It is only this stronger claim that will establish pro-theism (as opposed to indifferentism).¹⁹

We can now complete K&D's argument. K&D argue that if we accept NGE, then any 'axiological downsides' of God's existence

"cannot suffice to make the relevant worlds far worse overall than they would otherwise be, on naturalism, because these downsides, insofar as they are evils, are permitted either for the sake of obtaining a sufficiently significant, otherwise-unobtainable good, or for the sake of preventing a sufficiently significant, otherwise-unpreventable evil."²⁰

They describe it as a kind of 'philosophical judo move', because

"just as judo moves turn the force of one's opponent's blows against him, NGE takes the force of any axiological downside urged by the anti-theist, and turns it against anti-theism. So, if NGE is true, as many philosophers maintain, wide impersonal anti-theism is false."²¹

In earlier work, I had already suggested that, given that God can compensate for whatever downside is associated with His existence, it's likely that a Godly world will be one that is impersonally better than a godless one.²² What K&D's argument adds is that such a

world *must* be better. Moreover, while their argument focuses on the pairwise comparison of two variants of the actual world, and on impersonal antitheism, it can actually establish something considerably stronger.

First, if correct, it would support what I called Supreme Pro-Theism. There is after all nothing in K&D's argument that is specific to the contrast with the familiar naturalist universe. If it applies in that case, it should apply to *all* possible godless worlds—whether naturalist, supernatural or idealist.²³

Second, many philosophers hold that for God to be justified in permitting some evil to someone in order to bring about a sufficient good or prevent such an evil, then that further good (or prevention of evil) must benefit *that very person*. As Stump puts it, “if a good God allows evil it can only be because the evil in question produces a net benefit for the sufferer and one that God could not produce without the suffering”.²⁴ If we understand NGE in this individualist way, then the argument would establish *both* impersonal and personal pro-theism.²⁵

I believe, however, that the *Formal Argument from No Gratuitous Evil* fails.

Since NGE is a claim about evil, there is one straightforward way to block its application to anti-theism. For God's existence to make things overall worse, compared to a godless world, it needn't lead to any evil. It just needs to be a world that contains *less good* than the alternative. K&D briefly note this possibility, writing that their while “this objection could be evaded by denying that the alleged downsides are evils, this move would greatly diminish the seriousness of these downsides”²⁶ and thus weaken the force of the anti-theist argument. But that's incorrect. Wide anti-theism makes a comparative claim, saying that things would be overall worse if God exists. If a godless world is better, that's sufficient for the truth of anti-theism. It's true, of course, that if God's existence would make things not just worse, but *bad*, that could give us ever stronger reasons to wish that God didn't exist. But the significant loss of possible good is still a pretty serious matter. (Notice that most of the supposed ‘upsides’ of theism—e.g. God's own supreme value, or the good of immortality—work in exactly the same way. They are ways things would supposedly be better if God exists without in any way requiring things to be *bad* if He doesn't.)

Perhaps we should understand NGE more loosely, to apply to any loss of good? This is implausible. We don't, e.g. suffer evil, or harm, from the fact that we can't fly like angels or see into the future, even if there is some farfetched possible world where we do, and even if that would have made our lives better. And even if we regard the loss of goods *we did possess* as a kind of evil, this won't help, since if God exists we never, for example, enjoyed complete privacy.

So if the anti-theist argument only claims that God's existence leads to a comparative loss of good, K&D's argument will be immediately blocked. This is enough to show that the argument cannot show anti-theism to be incoherent. But I will now go on to argue that K&D's argument doesn't work *even* if the relevant downsides are understood as evils.

As K&D write, many philosophers accept NGE. What K&D have in mind, of course, is the role it has played in discussion of the problem of evil. However, the ‘downsides’ argued for by anti-theists are importantly different from the kinds of evils at the heart of the problem of evil. Think, for example, of a burning fawn or the Lisbon earthquake. These are evils that would exist *whether or not* God exists, and whose existence is *contingent*, even if God does exist. This means that, given that these evils *do* exist, then, if God exists, He must have either brought them about or allowed them to come about. But these two conditions don't apply in the case of anti-theist downsides. First, if God *doesn't* exist, the relevant evil—e.g. lack of privacy—*wouldn't* occur. Second, if God *does* exist, these evils would *necessarily* follow. As we saw, they aren't *permitted* by God since they are not under His control. He couldn't have prevented them from happening.

Since God doesn't permit these necessary downsides of His existence, NGE does not apply to these downsides. We cannot blame God for knowing our innermost secrets in the way we might blame Him for not preventing a deadly epidemic. And since God isn't morally responsible for violating our privacy, He doesn't need to justify it by reference to another good or evil.

This, however, is too quick. Suppose that complete loss of privacy is an intrinsic evil, an evil that necessarily follows from God's omniscience, *if* rational beings exist. And while it's not in God's power, I assume, to fail to be omniscient, *it is* in His power to not create rational beings. So there is admittedly a sense in which this evil is still contingent and preventable by God. And this may seem to open the door to applying NGE.

We can reframe K&D's argument against wide impersonal anti-theism to take this into account:

THE REVISED FORMAL ARGUMENT FROM NO GRATUITOUS EVIL

- (A) God will permit an evil to occur only for the sake of obtaining a greater, otherwise-unobtainable good, or for the sake of preventing a greater, otherwise-unpreventable evil. (NGE)
- (B) God would create rational beings only if the badness imposed on them is necessary for bringing about a greater good (or for preventing a greater evil). (from A)
- (C) If God exists, and decides to create rational beings, then the existence of rational beings must be a better outcome than the alternative in which they do not exist. (from B)
- (D) A world in which God exists and rational beings exist is necessarily better than an alternative in which rational beings exist but God does not. (from C).

Therefore,

- (E) Impersonal anti-theism is false.

One immediate problem with this argument is that (C) is a conditional. To get from (C) to (D), we need to assume that

- (F) The existence of rational beings is better than the alternative in which they do not exist.

Otherwise, the scenario in (D) can never be realised, and the argument fails. Notice, though, that if (F) is false, and, moreover, God's creating rational beings would lead to a worse outcome, then, since rational beings *do* exist, then we can conclude that God doesn't. Now, I do not endorse this peculiar anti-natalist argument for atheism and I'm actually inclined to accept (F): rational beings are of great value, and it seems unlikely that, say, the anti-theist curtailment of privacy or autonomy would outweigh that value.²⁷ What I wish to highlight, though, is that contrary to advertisement, the *Argument from Non-Gratuitous Evil* does assume here a non-obvious substantive axiological claim about the value of rational beings.²⁸

But set this aside. The *Argument from Non-Gratuitous Evil* anyway involves a slide. There is an ambiguity in (C), which makes the step to (D) illicit.²⁹ Properly understood—and this is already implicit in (A) and (B)—(C) makes a comparison between a possibility in which God exists *and* some evil is permitted, and one where God exists and it is *not* permitted; the latter would, in this case, be a world where *rational beings do not exist*. In other words, this premise should really be

- (C') If God exists, and decides to create rational beings, then the existence of rational beings must be a better outcome than the alternative in which *God exists* and these rational beings do not exist.

By contrast, (D) makes a comparison between a world in which rational beings exist, and God does, and where they exist, and *He doesn't*. Because the latter possibility isn't covered by (C'), the step to (D) is invalid.

While both NGE and anti-theism involve comparative axiological claims, each compares a different pair of possibilities:

	Rational Beings Exist	Rational Beings Don't Exist
God Exists	(1)	(2)
God Doesn't Exist	(3)	(4)

NGE compares two possibilities open to God—here, (1) vs. (2). But anti-theism is concerned with the contrast between (1) and (3). This is why, contrary to the emerging consensus, *NGE is perfectly consistent with wide impersonal anti-theism*. Just to illustrate, consider this set of possibilities (where the figures represent amounts of value):

	Rational Beings Exist	Rational Beings Don't Exist
God Exists	10	5
God Doesn't Exist	14	1

Here, God could permissibly create rational beings, despite knowing that this will lead to, say, the evil of invasion of privacy, because the other alternative open to Him would be considerably worse. But this is compatible with the claim that things would be even better had God not existed at all—this possibility isn't open to Him and, thus, is irrelevant to NGE (recall that NGE involves a deontic claim; a such, it is subject to the ought-implies-can constraint—a constraint that, surprisingly, *does* apply even to an omnipotent being).

I have so far set out the revised argument as an argument against *impersonal* anti-theism. But while several authors have assumed that if we adopt an individualistic understanding of NGE, we can easily extend the *Argument from Non-Gratuitous Evil* to also target personal anti-theism,³⁰ this is in fact far from straightforward. The problem is that, understood in this individualistic way, NGE is a claim about harms to individuals being permitted by God only if these harms benefit them or prevent even greater harms to them. But as we saw, God's choice is not whether not to allow some harm to occur to some *existing* persons. It is whether to create these persons in the first place.

The problem is that, on some influential views, we cannot benefit or harm persons by creating them—such choices, in Parfit's terminology, are not 'person-affecting' and can, on these views, only be assessed in impersonal terms.³¹ One worry is that it seems implausible to say that we harm possible people by not creating them—otherwise each of us will be unknowingly harming numerous such possible people and, moreover, individualistic NGE would imply that God must create *all* possible people. But these implications are absurd. So not creating rational beings would certainly not impose an even greater evil on them.

We could try to say that not to exist is to have a neutral level of well-being—although many doubt that this makes sense. But even if we accept this assumption, it is hard to see how God could harm rational people by creating them—even while foreseeing that once they come to exist, His existence would impose various anti-theist downsides on them. On the dominant account of harm, harm is a counterfactual notion: what harms is what makes us worse off than we would otherwise been.³² But, as we saw, the relevant alternative here is not to exist without these anti-theist downsides, but not to exist at all. This sets a very low bar for God to meet. For God to not be permitted to create rational persons, the lives they would have must be such that they would not be even worth living—that it would be better for them never to have existed. Many believe that lives of unrelenting suffering, with little or no

compensating good, would be such dreadful lives. Some people do face such suffering, and such lives are, indeed, hard to reconcile with individualistic NGE. But a life where, say, our privacy and autonomy are severely curtailed, while arguably involving considerable loss of good, aren't likely to be *that* bad. Even if we find this imposition on our privacy and autonomy deeply unwelcome, would we regret God's choice to create us (or allow us to be created)?³³ So God could easily meet the condition set by individualistic NGE even if we think it does apply to so-called 'creation ethics'. And meeting that low bar *in no way requires God to compensate to that loss of good compared to an alternative where these rational beings exist but God does not*.

To illustrate: whenever parents bring a child into existence, they do so knowing that this child will endure some pain and hardship throughout their life. But, unless we are anti-natalists (and theists cannot be), we do not think that creating children is for that reason in any way problematic, if we also expect that these bad things will be sufficiently outweighed by other goods. That we can *conceive* of some alternative in which our child is born (say to another family) but *doesn't* suffer any of those hardships is irrelevant to the morality of our procreative choice since that alternative isn't remotely on the menu, it's a mere fantasy. As is a godless world if God *does* exist.

4. THE FORMAL ARGUMENT FROM PERFECT GOODNESS

I conclude, then, that NGE presents no threat at all to anti-theism, whether personal or impersonal. It might be thought that even so, God *would* be required to compensate us for evils He imposes on us, even if blamelessly. It's not clear, however, what further moral principle is supposed to ground this claim. It's doubtful that we are required to fully compensate those we blamelessly harm (e.g. by blamelessly reading their private diary). And as we saw, God wouldn't actually harm us by bringing us into existence, despite the downsides involved. Recall the analogous case of a couple bringing a child into existence despite knowing it will face some adversity. Such a couple wouldn't be required to compensate the child, if they could, for that adversity, simply because we can conceive of fantastic counterfactuals where the child did not face any adversity.

It might be replied that God, being perfectly good and omnipotent, would still compensate us for any downsides His existence imposes—He would probably not want us to longingly contemplate the possibility of His non-existence. Now let's assume that God *can* compensate us for these downsides (though see below). Perhaps He would. But it's very doubtful that God would be morally *required* to do so. This means that a world in which He exists *may* be equal or better to one in which He doesn't. And that's not enough to rule out anti-theism.

In any event, such speculation about divine compensation seems like a needless detour. Why not appeal directly to God's perfect goodness? Since God is perfectly good, as well as omnipotent and omniscient, then you might think that He would give His creatures the best possible lives they could have. And isn't that sufficient to rule out wide anti-theism? Set out as an explicit argument, we get:

THE FORMAL ARGUMENT FROM GOD'S PERFECT GOODNESS

- (A) God is perfectly good.
 - (B) If God creates rational beings, He will give these beings (except, perhaps, those who are undeserving) the best possible lives.³⁴
 - (C) Our lives, if naturalism is true, are far from being the best possible.
- Therefore,
- (D) We will be overall better off if God exists than if naturalism is true.

In fact, on the basis of (B), we can make a stronger claim:

- (E) However good our lives are in some godless worlds, these lives *couldn't be better* than the best possible life (and might be worse, if the best possible life requires some relation to God).

Therefore,

- (F) If God exists, our lives would be either better than or no worse than *any* world in which He does not exist.

I take it that it's an understatement that (C) is true. Theists widely assume (B) to be necessarily true. While I don't myself find this so obvious, let's grant it. (D) still wouldn't follow.³⁵

This may seem surprising, but that's because (B) is again ambiguous. The argument works if (B) refers to the best possible life where 'possible' ranges over *all* possible worlds. Now let's concede that

- (B') God will grant His creations the best possible life *out of all those possible* in a world in which God *does* exist.

But that would not entail (D), let alone (F). To get to (D), we would still need to show that the best life in a Godly world is better than the life we have (or would) if naturalism is true. And this requires exactly the kind of substantive evaluative work we were hoping to avoid.³⁶

5. CONCLUSION

I have argued that, contrary to a common assumption, NGE is perfectly compatible with wide anti-theism in either its personal or impersonal form. Attempts to show that wide anti-theism is incoherent thus fail, and it cannot be rejected without substantial axiological debate about the value of, e.g., privacy, autonomy or moral equality, and how these compare to the undeniable positives that God's existence will bring about.

I concede that these positives mean that the prospects of wide impersonal pro-theism are still promising. There is, after all, God's own immense, perhaps infinite, value. And even if NGE cannot neutralise the anti-theist downsides as Kraay and Dragos assume, it does entail that a world in which God doesn't exist would be a world without gratuitous evil. And that surely seems an immense advantage.³⁷ I myself think, however, that closer inspection will reveal that this impression of immense advantage is misleading. But these substantive issues are beyond the scope of the present paper. And, in my view, the prospects of wide personal anti-theism remain wide open—at least for those of us who aren't victims of the worst kinds of evils that are (or at least seem) gratuitous.

Giving up the idea of a formal argument against anti-theism, has two further implications. First, if we accept that value is independent of God—as the debate about the axiology of theism more or less presupposes (there would be little left to discuss here if atheism implied axiological nihilism)—then whether pro-theism is true or false will depend on how things turn out to be in this independent axiological realm. In a sense, this leaves the truth of pro-theism to chance. Not literal chance, since fundamental value claims are arguably necessary truths. But even so, if pro-theism is true this is due to a kind of fortunate coincidence, even if it is a necessary coincidence. And this is a result that some theists may find uncomfortable.

Second, if NGE cannot be guaranteed to neutralise the anti-theist downsides then, so long as these are genuine downsides, then theism is unlikely to enjoy any kind of general axiological primacy. This is because at least some conceivable (and clearly counterfactual) godless worlds would offer many of the positives associated with theism—including eternal

bliss and the absence of gratuitous evil—while lacking theism’s distinctive downsides. Thus, even if a theist world would be superior to the fairly miserable naturalistic universe assumed by most atheists, it is unlikely to describe the best of all possible worlds.^{38, *}

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NOTES

¹ These distinctions were first introduced in Kahane (2011) and further developed by Klaas and Dragos (2013). In Kahane (2011) I understood pro- and anti-theism in terms of *attitudes* to God’s existence—wanting God to exist or not exist. While such attitudes should respond to the value of worlds or lives, they aren’t entailed

by such axiological facts. By contrast, Klaas and Dragos (2013) understand pro- and anti-theism to make purely axiological claims; here, I will follow their terminology. For an excellent introduction to the axiology of atheism, and a survey of the current debate, see Klaas (2018).

² For more detail, see Kahane (2011); Kahane (2018). See also Loughheed (2018); Maitzen (2018); Wielenberg (2018).

³ What is meant by ‘non-gratuitous evil’ will be unpacked below. Not everyone accepts NGE—theists who reject it include van Inwagen (1988); Hasker (1992); and Almeida (2012—but I will also consider here an argument against anti-theism that doesn’t appeal to NGE.

⁴ Klaas and Dragos (2013, 167).

⁵ Betenson (2018), Wielenberg (2018).

⁶ Betenson, 164.

⁷ Betenson, 165.

⁸ Betenson, 164.

⁹ Wielenberg, 158. See also Loughheed (2018) who similarly accepts this argument but doesn’t see it as conclusive on the ground that some theists reject NGE.

¹⁰ Betenson (2018), Wielenberg (2018).

¹¹ Tooley (2018) and Penner & Arbour (2018) makes a similar point about the link between atheism and pro-theism. But although their arguments for this also appeal to NGE, they are not best interpreted as arguments for the incoherence of anti-theism and are therefore beyond the scope of this paper.

¹² Dawkins (1995), 96.

¹³ If God is a necessary existent, as many theists hold, then there is no possible world in which God doesn’t exist, and perhaps this undermines the axiological question about God’s existence—rendering *all* positions in this debate incoherent; views that deny the coherence of theism have the same upshot. Since this issue has been discussed extensively elsewhere (see e.g. Kahane, 2011; 2013; Klaas, 2018) it will not be addressed here.

¹⁴ See Kahane (2011) and K&R (2013). K&R call this ‘restricted theism’, to distinguish it from the further claims associated with specific religious views (e.g. the trinity). For reasons discussed in fn. 15, I set aside here God’s alleged necessity.

¹⁵ This idea is suggested by Kahane (2011) and developed more precisely by Klaas and Dragos (2013). For discussion of a wider range of options, see Mawson (2018).

¹⁶ Though some theists might want to endorse this claim only when theism is wedded to a specific religion such as Christianity.

¹⁷ Ibid., 167.

¹⁸ Ibid., 166.

¹⁹ As K&D state the argument, it is meant to establish only the falsity of impersonal anti-theism when, moreover, it’s formulated as claiming that God’s existence would make the world *far* worse. I think that, in its most plausible form, it would actually entail pro-theism. But my criticisms below would also apply to this weaker understanding of the argument.

²⁰ Ibid., 167.

²¹ Ibid., 167.

²² Kahane (2011), 686-687.

²³ It doesn’t entail Supreme Pro-Theism because, so far as I can see, it doesn’t rule out that at least some of those godless alternatives are *equal* in value to the theist one.

²⁴ Stump (1985), 411–412. Notice that Stump’s formulation makes explicit that the balance of goods and evils must be positive—thereby entailing the pro-theist result.

²⁵ Wielenberg (2018) and Betenson (2018) both accept this extension.

²⁶ K&D, 167.

²⁷ Premise (C) assumes that it would be permissible, and even good, to create rational beings so long the overall balance of value this brings about is positive. Benatar (2006) argues that even if a life has an overall positive value *for* the person living that life, it may still be impermissible to create that life if it contains significant harms. I will not consider here this highly controversial anti-natalist claim that, it seems to me, immediately entails the truth of atheism given that we do exist and that many of us endure significant harms.

²⁸ Notice that if (F) is false, it will still be a substantive question whether a counterfactual with God but no rational beings is impersonally better than the actual world in which rational beings do exist but there’s no God. However, by definition, such a world could not be better *for* anyone, unless their lives are so bad as to be not even worth living. So if (F) is false the prospects of personal pro-theism would be very dim.

²⁹ I’ve already gestured at this problem in Kahane (2018).

³⁰ See again Wielenberg (2018) and Betenson (2018).

³¹ Parfit (1983).

³² Cf. Feinberg (1987).

³³ Of course, if we judge that some anti-theist downsides *would* make the lives of rational persons not worth living, that would just amount to rejecting the individualistic version of (F) above, giving us again a potential anti-natalist argument for atheism. But this would offer no relief to the critic of anti-theism.

³⁴ Those who deny that there is such a thing as the best possible life can revise the premise to one about a *supremely good life*, and revise premise (C) below to the very plausible claim that if naturalism is true, none of us enjoys such a supremely good life.

³⁵ As I explained in fn. 15, I set aside here the view that theism is incoherent, which would obviously rule out (D). Notice though that (C) could be true even if theism was incoherent since many supernaturalist possibilities are non-theist.

³⁶ It might be objected that this ignores the fact that, if God exists, at least some of us would enjoy a life of eternal bliss in heaven. Such a life would be infinitely good, and an infinitely good life cannot be worse than any alternative. It might be further argued that even if God's existence had downsides, these would surely be outweighed by eternal bliss. But that is too quick. First, that a positive life has infinite duration doesn't entail overall superiority to alternatives. If that were the case, then lives containing constant mild pleasure, and nothing else, would equal the best lives if extended infinitely. But many of us would prefer a fairly short, richer life to such an infinite life of mild pleasure (see Crisp, 1997). Second, it cannot be assumed that such a life would be infinitely good since, on some views, beyond a certain point, adding more of a kind of good adds less and less value, and eventually adds no value at all (see e.g. Hurka, 1983). Third, if God's existence imposes significant downsides, such as lack of complete privacy or subservient status, these downsides may have *lexical priority*, trumping however many other goods a life contains. If that is the case, then nothing God could provide would truly compensate us for the adverse effects of His existence. Finally, even if these anti-theist downsides are not lexically prior, they still won't be necessarily erased by infinite bliss. Loss of privacy or a subservient status may be less shocking than the evil of, say, torture. But on the theist view, we can only experience the evil of torture in our brief Earthly existence. By contrast, the anti-theist downsides will *necessarily continue forever*, always blotting that heavenly bliss.

³⁷ See Tooley (2018) and Penner and Arbour (2018) for pro-theist arguments that I interpret as *substantive* arguments from non-gratuitous evil.

³⁸ For a fuller development of this last argument, see Kahane (2018).

* I am grateful to Klaas Kraay and other participants in Ryerson University's philosophy of religion work-in-progress discussion group for very helpful suggestions about an early version of some of the ideas in this paper, and to Kirk Loughheed and several anonymous referees for extremely useful comments.