

DOES GOD MATTER? ESSAYS ON THE AXIOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THEISM

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BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

The question of whether God exists has long preoccupied philosophers. Many accounts of God have been proposed, and many arguments for and against God's existence have been offered and discussed. But while philosophers have been busy trying to determine whether or not God exists, they have generally neglected to ask this question: "Does it *matter* whether God exists?"

One natural way to approach this question is to seek to understand what difference God's existence would – or does – make to the value of the world and its inhabitants. This is not to inquire about the putative advantages or disadvantages of some individual or society having religious beliefs or engaging in religious practices. It is, instead, to inquire about the *axiological consequences* of God's existence.

The three major positions concerning the existence of God are displayed in the left-hand column of the table below. (I call these positions 'existential', since they concern whether God exists.) Across the top of the table are four views about the axiological consequences of God's existence. *Pro*-theism holds that if God exists, the world is better than it would otherwise be, while *anti*-theism maintains that if God exists, the world is worse than it would otherwise be. *Indifferentism* holds that if God exists, the world is neither better nor worse than it would otherwise be, and *agnosticism* holds that the overall axiological import of God's existence simply cannot be determined.

		Axiological Positions			
		<i>Pro</i> -theism	<i>Anti</i> -theism	Indifferentism	Agnosticism
Existential Positions	Theism				
	Atheism				
	Agnosticism				

Each of the twelve cells in the table represents a unique combination of existential and axiological positions. Let's briefly consider each column in turn. Most theists, implicitly or explicitly, are also *pro*-theists: they believe not only that God exists, but also that God's existence makes things better than they would otherwise be. But, of course, someone could be an atheist while simultaneously being a *pro*-theist: such a person denies that there is a God, but concedes that if there *were* such a being, the world would be much better as a direct, or indirect, result. One example is Michael Tooley, who writes: "it would be very good if it turned out, contrary to all probability, that God did exist, for while the existence of such a deity would ... ensure that the world was very good indeed".¹ Equally, someone might be agnostic about whether God exists, while still endorsing *pro*-theism.

Let's now turn to the *anti*-theism column. It is difficult, perhaps, to imagine a theist also being an anti-theist. But this does not show that it is impossible to hold both views consistently. Such a

¹ "Helping People to Think Critically about their Religious Beliefs." In *50 Voices of Disbelief*, ed. R. Blackford and U. Schüklenk. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, p.311

person would believe in God, while also believing, for one reason or another, that God's existence makes the world worse than it would otherwise be. Equally, someone could be an atheistic anti-theist. Thomas Nagel, an atheist, appears to have anti-theism in mind when he writes: "I want atheism to be true ... It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that!"². Moreover, someone might be agnostic about whether God exists, while still endorsing anti-theism.

Similar remarks apply to the columns for *indifferentism* and *agnosticism*. Clearly, a theist, an atheist, and an agnostic could each, in principle, maintain that God's existence would neither make the world far better nor far worse. And, finally, one who holds any of the three existential positions could also endorse agnosticism about the axiological issue, by asserting that it cannot be determined what effect God's existence would have on the world. There are, then, twelve distinct combinations of existential and axiological positions, as displayed in the table above.

The simplicity of this table can mask the formidable complexity of the underlying issues, and so three further points are worth mentioning.

First, of course, how one conceives of God will affect what one takes the axiological consequences of God's existence to be. For example, a deistic God who is indifferent to the weal or woe of creatures might not be thought to make the world any better than it would otherwise be. On the other hand, a maximally good God (who, for example, ensures that all victims of suffering are compensated in the afterlife) might well be thought to make the world significantly better than it would otherwise be. The authors in this volume attend to this issue carefully.

Second, these four axiological positions take for granted that there really are facts of the matter about the axiological difference that God's existence would (or does) make, whether or not these facts can be discovered. Let's call this assumption "axiological realism". The rival view, "axiological anti-realism", denies that there are any axiological facts in this domain. Here is one reason for the latter view. Many philosophers agree that God's existence is either necessary or impossible: either God exists in all possible worlds, or in no possible worlds. But if this view is correct, perhaps that the axiological effects of theism cannot sensibly be assessed. After all, it is natural to suppose that this assessment must involve comparing worlds which include God to worlds which lack God, but, if God's existence is either necessary or impossible, then there are not two kinds of worlds available for comparison. Various responses to this challenge have been offered in recent years, and this issue is discussed further in the volume.

The third point worth noting is that many distinct versions of each of the axiological positions have been identified. There are *narrow* and *wide* versions of these positions, and *impersonal* and *personal* versions as well. Some authors in this literature (and in this anthology) concentrate on one or more versions of these positions, while others consider the positions more broadly.

The present volume features ten original essays by twelve authors. (Two are co-authored contributions). Three of these defend versions of *pro-theism*, while three defend versions of *anti-theism* – these are the most prominent axiological positions. The remaining four essays consider, in various ways, the interplay between the existential and axiological debates. All of the authors are well-published philosophers, and many of them are prominent, senior figures in the philosophy of religion. Overall, this volume will significantly advance the discussion of this very important, yet surprisingly neglected, issue.

² *The Last Word*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.130.

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