

THE AXIOLOGY OF THEISM

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CONTENTS

1. Stage-Setting	5
2. Global Modal Space Pro-Theism	12
3. Actual World Pro-Theism	26
4. Local Modal Space Pro-Theism and Local Modal Space Anti-Theism	35
Reference List	50

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For my mother, Gerardina Adriana Kraay-Hofman (1935-2019).
I inherited her deep desire to think carefully about God.

1. STAGE-SETTING

Here is a provocative question: does it *matter* whether God exists? This question is not about *whether*, in fact, God exists. Nor is it about the value of *belief* in God. Nor is it about the value of *religious practices* oriented towards God. So, what is it about? Well, one way to tackle it is to examine whether, on the view that God exists, things are better, worse, or neither. Taking this approach, our question transforms into this: “What *axiological difference* would – or does – theism make?” Notice that this new question is deliberately phrased to be neutral between two perspectives: that of someone who believes that God exists, and that of someone who does not believe that God exists.¹ The theist, of course, thinks that God does exist, and so when she poses this question, she asks what difference God’s existence *really does* make. The non-theist, on the other hand, asks what difference God’s existence *would* make, if God *were* to exist.

Like so many philosophical questions, this one is deceptively simple to pose, and enormously difficult to answer. In recent years, however, philosophers have begun to tackle it with vigour and rigour.² They have tried to assess, in various ways, the axiological import of God’s existence, nature, and activity if theism is true, and, conversely, the axiological import of God’s *non*-existence, if theism is false. This topic has come to be known as the ‘axiology of theism’.³ This section sets the stage for the subsequent discussion. In 1.1, I set out five generic positions that one might take on this issue, and in 1.2 I clarify some key terms. In 1.3 I introduce a distinction between wide and narrow versions of these generic positions, I discuss how different versions of them can (and cannot) be combined, and I introduce some alternative views. In 1.4 I discuss a challenge to the intelligibility of this inquiry, and in 1.5 I briefly introduce key considerations that are (or could be) offered in favour of these five views. In 1.6 I set out the plan for the rest of this book.

1.1. Five Generic Positions

Here are five generic positions that one might take on this issue. I call them ‘generic’ because, as we will see, they can be specified in various ways.

GENERIC PRO-THEISM: Things are *better* on theism than on naturalism, and this is due to God’s existence, nature, or activity.

GENERIC ANTI-THEISM: Things are *worse* on theism than on naturalism, and this is due to God’s existence, nature, or activity.

¹ The latter, of course, may be either an agnostic or an atheist. Moreover, the latter needn’t be non-religious: there are many non-theistic religions, after all.

² Although important themes from this discussion are anticipated in Rescher (1990), the contemporary literature on this topic begins with Kahane (2011). For surveys of most of the discussion to date, see Kraay (2018a) and Loughheed (2019).

³ This term is infelicitous for two reasons. First, it might prompt the thought that broader questions about the relationship between God and value are at stake, whereas it really means to connote an investigation of the axiological consequences of theism, relative to some other worldview(s). Second, an important subsidiary thread has considered what preferences can be rational with respect to God’s existence or non-existence – and one point of dispute has been whether preferences must track axiological judgments in order to be rational.

GENERIC NEUTRALISM: Things are neither better nor worse on theism than on naturalism as a result of God’s existence, nature, or activity.⁴

GENERIC AGNOSTICISM: We should suspend judgment about what axiological difference God’s existence, nature, or activity makes, relative to naturalism.

GENERIC QUIETISM: The question of what axiological difference God’s existence, nature, or activity makes (relative to naturalism) is unanswerable in principle.

These axiological positions are displayed on the horizontal axis of the table below. The positions on the vertical axis represent three basic views about *whether God exists*. (That’s why I call them *existential* positions.)

Table 1: Combinations of Existential and Axiological Positions

		GENERIC AXIOLOGICAL POSITIONS				
		<i>Pro-Theism</i>	<i>Anti-Theism</i>	Neutralism	Agnosticism	Quietism
EXISTENTIAL POSITIONS	Theism					
	Atheism					
	Agnosticism					

The point of bringing these together in a table is to illustrate clearly various combinations of existential and axiological positions. A familiar one is theistic pro-theism. Someone who holds these views believes that God exists, and also that, as a result, things are *better* than they would be on naturalism. Another common combination is atheistic anti-theism. Someone who holds these views believes that God does not exist, and also that if God *were* to exist, things would be *worse* than on naturalism because of God’s existence, nature, or activity. At first glance, it might seem that every cell in the above table represents a coherent combination of positions, but this has been contested.⁵

1.2. Clarification of Terms

The axiological positions above involve key terms like ‘theism’, ‘naturalism’, ‘things’, ‘better’, and ‘worse’. These need to be clarified.

Let’s begin with ‘theism’. Evidently, the generic positions above carry no commitment to any particular account of God’s nature or activity. And of course, many different views about God have been proposed by philosophers, theologians, and others throughout history. This book will

⁴ This, of course, is compatible with things being either better or worse on theism, relative to naturalism, for reasons that *do not* involve God’s existence, nature, or activity.

⁵ Schellenberg (2018) and Tooley (2018) offer reasons for thinking that anti-theism entails atheism. For a survey of connections drawn in the literature between the existential and axiological issues, see Kraay (2018a, 18-19.) See also Hendriks (2020) and the subsequent discussion in Lougheed (2020).

generally concentrate on the following model of God: a personal being who is unsurpassable in power, knowledge, goodness, who is the ultimate creator and sustainer of everything that contingently exists, whose essential nature is fixed, and who exists in every logically possible world.⁶ This is an enormously important, influential – and controversial – model. But of course, one could undertake this sort of axiological investigation using other models of God, or indeed non-theistic worldviews.⁷

The view that such a being exists can be called *bare theism*.⁸ It can be fleshed out in myriad ways, which we can call *expansions* of bare theism. Some of these are thought to be logically entailed by bare theism. For example, some have said that if bare theism were true, there would be no evil at all. This consequence is thought to follow from the divine attributes, and so we can call views like this (putative) *logical expansions*. Other expansions of theism are not logical consequences; they are simply addenda. Consider, for example, the familiar idea that God sometimes performs miracles. Many putative expansions of bare theism of both types have been proposed, and, of course, many are enormously controversial.⁹ In the rest of this book, I generally concentrate on bare theism, but I will signal when I turn to various common and important expansions.

The next key term is ‘naturalism’. This is the view that there are no supernatural beings, processes, mechanisms, or forces. Most of the literature to date involves a comparative axiological evaluation of theism and naturalism. But, of course, *non-naturalistic*, *non-theistic* views could be compared to theism. Consider, for example, the view that there necessarily exists a being just like God except in one respect: instead of perfectly good, this being is perfectly *bad*. (It’s enormously plausible to suppose that things are better in various ways on theism than on a worldview involving a malevolent deity.) I will follow the majority of the literature in comparing theism to naturalism. Moreover, I will concentrate on a version of naturalism that denies that there are natural beings, processes, mechanisms, or forces that have the same axiological effects as God is thought to have. For example, pro-theists sometimes say that if theism is true, God ensures that ultimate justice will prevail, and anti-theists sometimes say that if theism is true, God violates our privacy. I will assume that, if naturalism is true, nothing likewise guarantees ultimate justice or universally compromises our privacy. After all, there is no scientific reason to suppose that any such being, processes, mechanisms, or forces exist on naturalism, so they can be set aside.¹⁰

The first three axiological positions speak rather loosely about God’s existence, nature, and activity making ‘things’ better or worse. But what are these things to which theism is held to make an axiological difference? To date, most of the literature has focused on value-bearers like

⁶ I will occasionally follow tradition by using masculine personal pronouns for God, but I do not mean to suggest thereby that God has either a sex or a gender. This definition of theism, evidently, makes neither claim.

⁷ Discussions of other models of God by analytic philosophers can be found in Diller and Kasher (2013) and Buckareff and Nagasawa (2016). For efforts to broaden the axiological discussion to other worldviews, see Dumsday (2020) and the ensuing exchange with the other contributors in Loughheed (2020), and see also Loughheed (forthcoming, Chapters 7-10).

⁸ An even more austere version of theism holds merely that God is the greatest possible being, without specifying what this involves.

⁹ By this I mean that it’s controversial whether the former are logical consequences of theism, and it’s controversial whether the latter are plausible expansions.

¹⁰ Three discussions that are not restricted in these ways are Kahane (2018), Licon (forthcoming), and Loughheed (forthcoming, Chapter 6).

the actual world and *the lives of persons*.¹¹ Here are two examples. Some pro-theists argue that on theism, God's existence, nature, or activity ensures that the *actual world* is better than it would be on naturalism; meanwhile, some anti-theists argue that on theism, God's existence, nature, or activity ensures that the *lives of persons* are worse than they would be on naturalism. But these are not the only possible objects of axiological evaluation. More broadly, one could examine the axiological import of theism for a range of worlds, or even for the entirety of modal space (as I will do in section 2). More narrowly, one could examine the axiological import of theism for a proper part of a world, for the lives of some group of persons, or the life of just one person, or even for one or more *segments* of a life or lives. It is extremely important to be clear about what *value-bearing entity* is the object of one's axiological evaluation.¹²

Finally, these axiological positions are value-judgments, and so one might wonder what sort of value is at issue. As we will see, philosophers in this discussion have generally focused on either the intrinsic or instrumental (dis)value of God's existence, nature, or activity, with respect to either the lives of persons, or the worlds they inhabit.

1.3. Scope Issues, Combining Positions, and Alternate Views

Once the relevant object of axiological evaluation is specified, an important distinction can be introduced. The generic positions above can be understood *narrowly* or *widely*. The former concerns the axiological consequences of theism in *one or more respects only*, while the latter focuses on the *overall* axiological effects of theism for the relevant object of evaluation. Consider, for example, the actual world. A *narrow actual world anti-theist* thinks that the actual world is worse *in some respect(s)* on theism than on naturalism, whereas a *wide actual world pro-theist* thinks that the actual world is *overall* better on theism than on naturalism. As the object of axiological evaluation is specified, and as this distinction is applied, these views become specific, rather than generic.

Each of the five axiological views can be construed widely or narrowly. This means that there are at least thirty possible combinations of existential and axiological positions for each object of axiological evaluation.¹³ Some of these pairs can be held consistently with others. For example, consider an atheist who thinks that God's existence would make the lives of all persons better *in certain respect(s)*, but who is unsure about the *overall* axiological import of theism on the lives of all persons. With respect to this object of axiological evaluation (the lives of all

¹¹ In the versions of theism I have in mind, God is considered a person as well. (Indeed, on Trinitarian variants of theism, God is considered *tri-personal*.) But in what follows, when I speak of persons, I will intend *non-divine* persons, unless I note otherwise.

¹² The literature has typically distinguished between *personal* and *impersonal* versions of these views. Unsurprisingly, the former have persons as their primary focus, while the latter do not. This distinction no longer strikes me as terribly helpful, so I will not rely on it here. Here is a quick rationale. One could hold, for example, that a *world* is overall good only if certain *person-affecting* requirements are met. (Perhaps, for instance, all persons must have lives that are on balance worth living in order for a world to be considered overall good.) Suppose a pro-theist holds that God ensures that all worlds that include persons are overall good. The object of axiological evaluation here is a world, not a person, so by that criterion the view is impersonal – but of course it centrally involves a person-affecting consideration. For further discussion of this distinction, see Mawson (2012).

¹³ I say 'at least' because, with respect to a given object of axiological evaluation, narrow judgments can be combined without forming wide judgments. For example, one might hold that the actual world is better (or worse) in several respects on theism than on naturalism, or that it is better in some respects but worse in others, without holding that it is better or worse *overall*. These combinations represent additional possibilities.

persons), such an atheist would be both a *narrow pro-theist* and *wide agnostic*. But, clearly, not all combinations are compossible. For example, if one is a quietist in either the wide or narrow sense about some object of axiological evaluation, one cannot also be a pro-theist or anti-theist in the same sense about the same object. And, of course, this is so regardless of what position one takes on the question of whether God exists.

Moreover, one can hold one axiological position with respect to one object of evaluation, and a different axiological position with respect to a different object of evaluation. For example, one might think that on theism, the *lives of certain persons* are worse than they would be on naturalism (either in some respect or overall), while holding that on theism, *worlds of a certain sort* are better than they would be on naturalism (either in some other respect or overall).

Generic pro-theism and anti-theism suggest that God's existence, nature, or activity *ensures* that things are better or worse, respectively, on theism than on naturalism. More modest variants of these positions hold that God's existence, nature, or activity *makes it likely* that things are better or worse. (Likewise, probabilistic variants of the remaining three positions could be devised.) In addition, some authors have focussed on whether it is *rational to prefer* that theism or naturalism is true, instead of on what axiological difference theism makes. Analogues of each of the five axiological positions can be devised that invoke rational preference.¹⁴ Probabilistic variants of the axiological positions, and the views about rational preference, can also be construed narrowly or widely. The points I made about combining existential and axiological positions also apply to these, *mutatis mutandis*. In what follows I generally focus on non-probabilistic axiological judgments.

To date, most work in this area has concerned pro-theism and anti-theism about the value of actual world and the lives of persons, based on an axiological comparison of theism and naturalism, and mostly expressed in non-probabilistic terms. But, given the vast array of views distinguished here, and the ways they can be combined – and given that there are many alternatives to both theism and naturalism as I have construed them – it is clear that this discussion could be broadened in numerous ways.

1.4. Are the Relevant Comparisons Intelligible?

Theists often hold that God exists in *all* logically possible worlds. In other words, God's existence is *logically necessary*.¹⁵ Indeed, this was part of the definition of bare theism above. Notice that on this view, there are no logically possible worlds *lacking* God available for axiological comparison. Nor, hence, are there any possible persons or lives on naturalism available for comparison. These worlds, persons, and lives are all strictly *impossible*. Likewise, naturalists often hold that God's existence is *logically impossible*.¹⁶ If so, there are no logically possible worlds *including* God available for axiological comparison. Nor, hence, are there possible persons or lives on theism available for comparison. This seems to threaten the intelligibility of the comparative axiological project, since in either case, one of the putative comparates is impossible.

¹⁴ It is often assumed that what it is rational for one to prefer perfectly tracks one's axiological assessment, but this has been denied. For discussion of the literature on rational preference in this domain, see Kraay (2018a: 21-22).

¹⁵ The points in this paragraph could also be expressed with reference to *metaphysical* possibility and necessity. For important discussions of how the distinction between logical and metaphysical possibility can be brought to bear in this debate, see Mawson (2012 and 2018). For complaints about construing God as logically necessary in this debate, see Moser (2013).

¹⁶ For example, some hold that a pair of essential attributes of God is inconsistent. To think this is to hold that God, so construed, is logically impossible. For arguments in this vein, see Martin and Monnier (2003).

There is a consensus in the literature that this challenge is not fatal, but none on how best to respond.¹⁷ In this book, I will follow a strategy first suggested by Kahane (2011, 36): I will focus on *epistemic possibilities*. This means that I will assume that both theism and naturalism are *true for all we know*, and I will then compare various epistemically possible worlds or states of affairs in which theism is true with various epistemically possible worlds or states of affairs in which naturalism is true.¹⁸

1.5. Considerations Supporting Each Generic Axiological View

As noted, most of the discussion has concentrated on various versions of pro-theism and anti-theism with respect to the actual world and the lives of persons. Here are six considerations offered in favour of *pro-theism*: on theism, God ensures that (a) ultimate justice prevails; (b) morality is anchored; (c) persons' lives are, or can be, meaningful; (d) there is no gratuitous evil; (e) involuntary, undeserved suffering ultimately benefits those who experience it, and that (f) most persons believe that God exists, which is a prerequisite for being able to enter into a relationship with God. And, of course, no equivalent guarantees are available on naturalism. Meanwhile, here are six considerations offered in favour of *anti-theism*: on theism, relative to naturalism, persons have significantly (a) less freedom, (b) less dignity, and (c) less privacy; and, moreover, (d) the world is less intelligible; (e) commonsense morality is compromised, and (f) some people's lives are rendered meaningless. I will discuss all twelve of these, and the interplay between them, in section 4. For now I will simply note that, in principle, the first six can be harnessed to support narrow or wide variants of pro-theism, and the second six can be harnessed to support narrow or wide variants of anti-theism, in both cases relative to various different objects of axiological evaluation.

One way to be a *neutralist* holds that, with respect to some object of axiological evaluation, the 'upsides' of theism posited by pro-theists are precisely counterbalanced by the 'downsides' posited by anti-theists, or that they are, in Ruth Chang's sense, "on par" (Chang 1997). A more radical way holds that there are no axiological consequences of God's existence, nature, or activity whatsoever. Neutralism has not been defended in the literature to date. It might, however, inform a view that has been discussed: *apatheism*.¹⁹ The apatheist is apathetic about, or indifferent to, the question of whether God exists. If you think that God's (non)existence makes no axiological difference, you might thereby be led to apatheism.

The *agnostic* about this issue believes that we should suspend judgment about the axiological effects of God's existence, nature, or activity, relative to naturalism, with respect to some object of axiological evaluation. The *positive* agnostic judges that, given the available arguments and evidence, suspending judgment is the most reasonable thing to do. The *withholding* agnostic, on the other hand, simply withholds judgment, even about the statement 'agnosticism is the most reasonable position'.²⁰ Either version can be motivated by considering

¹⁷ For a survey of responses, see Kraay (2018: 5-7). See also Oppy (2020) and the subsequent discussion in Lougheed (2020).

¹⁸ Of course, as Kahane says, this strategy is only open to those who do not take themselves to *know* that theism (or atheism) is true. Such individuals cannot, after all, deem the relevant alternative to be epistemically possible. If they wish to engage in this comparative axiological project, they will have to adopt a different strategy.

¹⁹ For discussions of apatheism, see Nelson (1996), Oppy (1998), Hedberg and Huzarevich (2017), Beshears (2019), and Citron (*ms.*)

²⁰ Thanks to Nathan Ballantyne for suggesting this distinction.

the difficulties involved in making the relevant comparisons.²¹ Doubts about our abilities come in two basic types. First, one might doubt that we have the wherewithal to properly isolate and hold before our minds the relevant object of evaluation. Second, one might doubt that we have the ability to properly grasp or assess the axiological import of the (putatively) value-adding and value-reducing consequences of theism, individually or jointly. The larger the object of evaluation is, the more plausible such concerns can seem.²²

Finally, the *quietist* holds that, for some object of axiological evaluation, no intelligible comparison can be made. I mentioned one reason for this view above: someone who holds that theism is logically necessary (or, alternatively, that theism is logically impossible) might believe that this *in principle* defeats any attempt to engage in comparative axiological analysis.²³ A different motivation for quietism involves incommensurability or incomparability. For example, someone who believes that all theistic worlds are overall incommensurable and incomparable with all naturalistic worlds might be inclined to think that no wide axiological comparison of such worlds is possible in principle.

1.6. Outline of this Book

In the rest of this book, I largely set aside neutralism, agnosticism, and quietism about this axiological issue. This is because a central goal is to orient readers to the literature, and these views have not been discussed much to date. In section 2, I examine the problems and prospects for an extremely ambitious form of pro-theism: *global wide modal space pro-theism*. This view holds that, considered in its entirety, modal space is overall better on theism than on naturalism.²⁴ In section 3 I examine the problems and prospects for *wide actual world pro-theism*. This view holds that the actual world is overall better on theism than on naturalism. Finally, in section 4 I examine *local modal space pro-theism* and *local modal space anti-theism*. The former holds that worlds that are relevantly and sufficiently similar to the actual world are *better* on theism than on naturalism, while the latter holds that these worlds are *worse* on theism than on naturalism. In each case, I aim to map the relevant terrain by charitably explaining the arguments for and against each position, and by showing how they connect to related philosophical and theological topics.

²¹ The *modal skepticism* of Peter van Inwagen (1998) could be used to support this view. For a helpful introduction to pertinent issues in modal epistemology, see Vaidya (2015).

²² For example, it might seem entirely beyond our ability to trace all the consequences, in a given world, of the truth of theism (or, for that matter, of the falsity of theism). And perhaps identifying them all, and evaluating their axiological import, both individually and jointly, is necessary in order to arrive an overall judgment of the axiological status of that world. For more on this, see Kraay (2018a: 7-9).

²³ A robust defence of this view would presumably provide reasons why none of the proposed solutions to this problem are viable.

²⁴ The views in this paragraph all hold, of course, that the relevant axiological difference is due to God's existence, nature, or activity.