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# PERSONAL ANTI-THEISM AND THE MEANINGFUL LIFE ARGUMENT

Myron A. Penner

In a recent paper, Guy Kahane asks whether God's existence is something we should *want* to be true. Expanding on some cryptic remarks from Thomas Nagel, Kahane's informative and wide-ranging piece eventually addresses whether *personal anti-theism* is justified, where personal anti-theism is the view that God's existence would make things worse overall for oneself. In what follows, I develop, defend, but ultimately reject the Meaningful Life Argument, according to which if God's existence precludes the realization of certain goods that seem to an agent to constitute a meaningful life, it is rational for an agent both to believe that personal anti-theism is true and to prefer that God not exist.

## *Introduction*

In a recent paper, Guy Kahane asks whether God's existence is something we should *want* to be true.<sup>1</sup> Expanding on some cryptic remarks from Thomas Nagel,<sup>2</sup> Kahane's informative and wide-ranging piece eventually addresses whether *personal anti-theism* is justified, where personal anti-theism is the view that God's existence would make things worse overall for oneself. In what follows, I build on the argument-sketch Kahane presents in support of personal anti-theism and develop The Meaningful Life Argument.<sup>3</sup> The essence of the Meaningful Life Argument is that if God's existence precludes the realization of certain goods that seem to an agent to constitute a meaningful life, it is rational for that agent both to believe that personal anti-theism is true and to prefer that God not exist. After presenting the Meaningful Life Argument and showing how its

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<sup>1</sup>Guy Kahane, "Should We Want God to Exist?," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 82 (2011), 674–696. Kahane utilizes a classical theistic concept of God in his paper, and that's the concept of God I'll have in view as well.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 160, states "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," quoted in Kahane, 679. For another expansion of themes addressed by Nagel, see Stephen T. Davis, "On Preferring that God Not Exist (Or that God Exist): A Dialogue," *Faith and Philosophy* 31 (2014), 143–159.

<sup>3</sup>More precisely, what I'll develop is an argument template, because two of the premises contain open variables. I then consider a particular instance of this using Kahane's substitution instances for these variables.



premises can be defended, I raise some objections to show that, although the Meaningful Life Argument is ultimately unsuccessful, it illuminates some important insights concerning the rationality of using one's preferences for discerning a meaningful life in the absence or presence of God.

### I. On Preferring that God Exists

The question of what value God's existence would add to the world is interesting in that disagreeing about whether God exists doesn't preclude rational agreement about whether God's existence would add value to the world. For example, it's neither extraordinary nor obviously irrational for an atheist to find herself thinking the following:

Well, I don't believe in a God, but I wish there were a God. I can see how things would be better in certain respects, and perhaps better overall, if there were a God. If God—an all-powerful and super-good agent—were real, that would seem to entail that the world isn't as meaningless or paradoxical as it appears to be. There'd be some sense of divine cosmic justice according to which things eventually get balanced out, even if the way this gets worked out is hidden at present. Now, I don't for a moment believe that God is real. Thinking "It would be good X exists" is no basis for thinking that X is real. But still, it'd be nice if there were a super-good, super-powerful agent managing things toward some kind of good, ultimate end.

Following Kahane, we can call this view that God's existence would add value to the world, *pro-theism*.<sup>4</sup>

Kahane describes a different perspective on the value—in this case, the negative impact—God's existence would have on the world:

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. . . . 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.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Kahane, "Should We Want God to Exist?," 694. Klaas Kraay and Chris Dragos explicate the term more fully and locate pro-theism in relation to a number of other options in logical space with respect to God's existence and the value God's existence could add to a world; see Klaas Kraay and Chris Dragos, "On Preferring God's Non-existence," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 43 (2013), 157–178.

<sup>5</sup>Kahane, "Should We Want God to Exist?," 691–692.

According to Kahane, this “is the strongest defense of Nagel’s wish” that the universe not include the existence of God.<sup>6</sup>

Given that theists typically think of God as a necessary being, one might wonder whether there’s a meaningful sense according to which theists and atheists can entertain comparisons between worlds  $W_n$  and  $W_m$  where God is said to exist in  $W_n$  but not in  $W_m$ . However, if God is a necessary being, then either God exists in every world or in no world at all. Thus for theists, the conditional “If God doesn’t exist, then my life would be more meaningful than if God does exist” is a counterpossible: a counterfactual with a necessarily false antecedent, and unpacking the meaningfulness of counterpossibles is notoriously tricky.<sup>7</sup> Kahane recognizes the problem of counterpossibles, but isn’t too concerned about whether this prevents meaningfully comparing God-inclusive and God-exclusive worlds.<sup>8</sup> While a foray into the semantics of counterpossibles would take us too far afield, I will adopt Kahane’s assumption that “we can intelligibly value necessities and impossibilities” in the way implied by counterpossibles.<sup>9</sup>

## II. The Meaningful Life Argument

### II.1. Kahane’s Argument

The phrase “meaningful life” is one of those common expressions that seems to be well understood even though rarely defined, perhaps in part because it is difficult to do so, and perhaps in part because lacking a precise definition doesn’t preclude ability to understand, roughly, the meaning of the term. A detailed attempt to specify what constitutes a meaningful life is beyond the scope of this paper. However, by the phrase “meaningful life,” I simply mean something along the lines of “what an ideal rational agent would say, on reflection, makes a life worth living.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 692.

<sup>7</sup>For some recent work on counterpossibles and their implications for theism, see Wes Morriston “What if God Commanded Something Terrible? A Problem for Divine Command Theorists,” *Religious Studies* 45 (2009), 249–267; see also Richard Brian Davis and W. Paul Franks, “Counterpossibles and the ‘Terrible’ Divine Command Deity” *Religious Studies* (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup>Kahane, “Should We Want God to Exist,” 672, states:

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 [“It would be exceedingly bad if God does not exist,” and “It would be exceedingly good if God exists”].

<sup>9</sup>T. J. Mawson thinks that distinguishing between metaphysically possible worlds and logically possible worlds will allow for a meaningful way to draw comparisons with worlds picked out by the antecedents of counterpossibles; see T. J. Mawson, “On Determining How Important it is Whether or not There is a God,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4 (2012), 95–105.

<sup>10</sup>Analytic philosophers have been paying increasing attention to the question of whether or how life is meaningful. Not surprisingly, much attention has been given to clarify and understand precisely what the question “What is the meaning of life?” means. A detailed answer to that question is beyond the scope of this paper. For excellent surveys of key is-

In the following section, I develop the argument sketched by Kahane above and convert a version of it into a standard logical format. We'll need to have two preliminary concepts in view in order to present the argument. First, let *moral goods* be those goods that only moral agents are able to experience or pursue in virtue of their being *moral* agents. Second, let's stipulate that for some agents, striving for, and perhaps obtaining, a meaningful life, depends on obtaining or pursuing some moral goods. This stipulation allows us to identify the following set: let " $M_S$ " name the set of moral goods such that from some agent  $S$ 's perspective, obtaining or pursuing the goods in  $M_S$  is necessary for  $S$  to have a meaningful life. Introducing the set  $M_S$  captures the idea Kahane expresses at various points in his paper: namely, the role of life-plans in determining a meaningful life, and both the good of pursuing one's plan for one's life and the absurdity of a life in which one is unable to pursue what one deems to be a life worth living.<sup>11</sup>

We're now in a position to present the Meaningful Life Argument Template:

### The Meaningful Life Argument Template

1. If God's existence would constrain or prevent  $S$  from obtaining some of the goods in  $M_S$ , then God's existence would constrain or prevent  $S$  from obtaining what she thinks is a meaningful life.
2. If God's existence would constrain or prevent  $S$  from obtaining what she thinks is a meaningful life, then it's rational for  $S$  to prefer that God doesn't exist.
3. So, if God's existence would constrain or prevent  $S$  from obtaining some of the goods in  $M_S$ , then it's rational for  $S$  to prefer that God doesn't exist.
4. God's existence would constrain or prevent  $S$  from obtaining some of the goods in  $M_S$ .
5. Thus, it's rational for  $S$  to prefer that God doesn't exist.

#### II.2. Defense of Premises

(1) is true on the description of  $M_S$  given above. According to that description, pursuing the goods in  $M_S$  is a necessary condition for  $S$  to have a meaningful life. Thus, if God's existence prevents or constrains  $S$  from satisfying this necessary condition, then God's existence prevents or constrains  $S$  from obtaining a meaningful life, just as (1) states.

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sues and recent contributions in the "meaning of life" literature, see Thaddeus Metz, "New Developments in the Meaning of Life," *Philosophy Compass* 2 (2007), 196–217, and Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); see also Joshua Seachris, *Exploring the Meaning of Life: An Anthology and Guide* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2013), and Eric J. Wielenberg, *Virtue and Value in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 16–23.

<sup>11</sup>Kahane, "Should We Want God to Exist?," 691–693.

One might wonder what it means to “constrain or prevent  $S$  from obtaining the goods in  $M_5$ ” such that “God’s existence would constrain or prevent  $S$  from obtaining what she thinks is a meaningful life.” For example, suppose a meaningful life arises from achieving some good  $g$  to a degree or threshold  $n$ , even though it’s possible for any person to experience  $g$  to a magnitude of  $2n$ . In that case, God’s constraining  $S$ ’s experience of  $g$  to, say, an order of  $1.5n$  would be a scenario in which the antecedent of (1) obtains, but not the consequent. As such, I’m going to stipulate that by “constrain or prevent  $S$  from obtaining the goods in  $M_5$ ” I mean in a way that precludes  $S$  from having a meaningful life.

(2) is true based on a plausible assumption about rational preference: namely, that it’s rational to prefer the pursuit of a meaningful life, a life deemed worth living, over alternatives. However, a scenario raised by Klaas Kraay calls this principle into question by presenting two cases in which the antecedent of (2) is true but it seems that the consequent is false:

Suppose  $S$  thinks that God’s existence would render  $S$ ’s life meaningless but would also completely ensure  $S$ ’s children’s eternal blissful afterlife. Is it then rational for  $S$  to prefer God’s nonexistence? That might seem awfully selfish. A more dramatic example: what if God’s existence makes  $S$ ’s life meaningless, but makes the world as a whole significantly, even infinitely better off? Then it might be rationally permissible—perhaps even rationally obligatory—for  $S$  to prefer theism.<sup>12</sup>

Are these cases in which God’s existence prevents or constrains  $S$  from obtaining a meaningful life and yet it still remains irrational, and perhaps morally blameworthy, to prefer atheism? Both cases have the common feature that one’s failing to achieve a meaningful life results in some great good for another person—either the good of one’s children’s eternal bliss, or infinite good experienced by the rest of the world as a whole. This feature of the cases is worth considering in some detail.

For simplicity, let’s name the putative good of contributing to others’ bliss *other-bliss*. Now either  $S$ ’s manifesting *other-bliss* will be meaning-conferring for  $S$  or it won’t. That is, either  $S$ ’s exemplifying this property will contribute to the meaning of  $S$ ’s life<sup>13</sup> or it won’t. If *other-bliss* does contribute to the meaning of  $S$ ’s life, then Kraay’s cases collapse into incoherence, for they generate the following contradiction:  $S$ ’s life has meaning (because it contains *other-bliss*) and  $S$ ’s life is meaningless (for God has rendered it so by hypothesis). Thus, the only way to make the cases intelligible is to assume that *other-bliss* will not be meaning-conferring.

It does seem at first glance that if *other-bliss* is not meaning-conferring, then we do have a counter-example to premise (2) of the Meaningful Life Argument. However, determining whether these sorts of cases are genuine counter-examples will require further discussion about the

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<sup>12</sup>Raised in correspondence.

<sup>13</sup>Making *other-bliss* a member of  $M_5$ .

plausibility, on theism, of God's rendering anyone's life meaningless, let alone of God's securing the bliss of others only through the meaningless existence of another's life. For example, both theists and non-theists might argue that Kraay's cases seem to contradict the theistic concept of God's perfect goodness,<sup>14</sup> in which case Kraay's cases collapse into incoherence once again by generating a contradiction, albeit a different contradiction than the one considered above. Here the contradiction would be: God (by hypothesis a perfectly good being) performs an action demonstrating that God is not a perfectly good being. Another strategy available to the proponent of the Meaningful Life Argument is to argue that the disjunct we are now considering—*S*'s choosing a life that exemplifies *other-bliss* even though her own life is rendered meaningless as a result—is inconsistent with any substantive model of what constitutes a meaningful life. Consider my generic slogan according to which a meaningful life is what an ideal agent would, on reflection, consider to make life worth living. On that account, preferring a life that contained *other-bliss* even though one's own life is meaningless—an implication of Kraay's cases—is deemed meaningful. Thus, as interesting as Kraay's cases are, more work needs to be done in order to determine whether they constitute genuine counter-examples to (2) of the Meaningful Life Argument.

While (3) follows from (1) and (2) based on logical form, (4) is more controversial, for according to it there are some moral goods such that God's existence would constrain or prevent a moral agent *S* from obtaining them. Recall that Kahane's substitution candidates for such goods are independence, understanding, privacy, and solitude. In order for these candidates to be legitimate substitution instances for the goods mentioned in (4), two further claims need to be established for each putative moral good. First, it would need to be established that each putative moral good is in fact a moral good. And second, it would need to be established that God's existence would prevent or constrain some moral agent *S* from obtaining that moral good.

### II.3. Kahane's Candidates

Let's address these two questions for each of Kahane's candidates, with the understanding that I won't commit myself to any particular meta-ethical theory. Instead, I'll make some general observations about what each of Kahane's candidates has going for it such that there's good reason to think that they can be embedded within a variety of meta-ethical theories.

Consider a parallel example concerning the moral good of *truth-telling*. Truth-telling is a good candidate for a moral good precisely because it can easily be accommodated (with certain qualifications) in a variety of normative theories. We typically prefer being told the truth to being lied

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<sup>14</sup>Especially if one adopts Marilyn Adams's view that God is good to a person if, and only if, God guarantees to a person a life that is, on balance, a great good to that person; see Marilyn Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).



to. Even though we may sometimes not like the content of what is truthfully told to us, when told something at all, we typically prefer that it be told in truth. Thus, reciprocity and fairness, also widely held features that factor into ethical systems, dictate that I not only prefer truth-telling but that I practice it as well. To be sure, deontological, consequentialist, virtue, or divine-command accounts of morality will each give different accounts for how truth-telling fits the meta-ethical facts, but that truth-telling can be so accommodated is a feature which indicates that truth-telling is a moral good.

The only meta-ethical theory off limits for the sequel is any view according to which all value is grounded in God. This is consistent with the approach taken by Kahane who observes that “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.”<sup>15</sup> I’m going to assume that many claims that stem from our ethical intuitions and inferences can be accommodated by a variety of meta-ethical systems including, but not limited to, God-based value systems. Thus, if one doesn’t *need* a God-based value system to account for our ethical intuitions and inferences, and it’s the case that a God-based value system precludes our ability to rationally assess the Meaningful Life Argument, we shouldn’t worry about how Kahane’s candidates square with God-based moral systems.<sup>16</sup>

With this background, let’s consider the putative moral good of independence. Independence is typically associated with goods like control, autonomy, and the ability to determine one’s own future. Independence and the ability to flourish on one’s own are measures of flourishing adulthood. Moreover, when our independence is compromised—either through external factors beyond our control (e.g., unjust imprisonment, poor health, social constraint) or our own culpable negligence, it appears as though something has gone wrong. Independence has a *prima facie* plausibility as a moral good.

Would God’s existence constrain one’s ability to achieve independence? Yes, at least in some key respects. Theistic accounts of God as a maximally great being include the idea that God is both creator and sustainer of all that is. Creatures thus depend on God for their being brought into and sustained throughout their existence. As creator, God sets the purposes for created things such that flourishing for any creature is a function of conforming to or achieving the ends *God* has set for that creature. This is perhaps the most important and pervasive way in which one’s independence is compromised if God exists, for one would always be a subordinate, subject to the rule of another.

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<sup>15</sup>Kahane, “Should We Want God to Exist?,” 679.

<sup>16</sup>For views stressing the importance of God for coherent and comprehensive moral theory, see John Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God’s Assistance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); see also C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).



Another way in which independence is compromised if God exists is in virtue of the obligations that arise in virtue of being in the social relation of creature to creator. According to C. Stephen Evans:

[I]f God exists and is a genuine person, then the relation between creature and creator is a genuine social relation, and like other such relations, carries with it distinctive obligations. . . . A proper social relation with God is one that requires humans to recognize the enormous debt of gratitude they owe to God, as well as the value of an on-going relation to God. Most religious believers have seen this relation to God as one in which God rightly has authority over them. This authority might be explained in various ways, as stemming from God's ownership rights as creator, or as grounded in the gratitude owed to God for God's good gifts, or as grounded in the goods which a relation to God makes possible.<sup>17</sup>

Things get worse with respect to independence on certain theistic accounts that are strongly theologically determinist, where God is deemed to be the only efficient cause. For on such accounts, God's sustaining creatures in existence entails that God is causally responsible for every feature of every created thing at every moment at which it exists. So, there's good reason to think that independence is compromised if God exists.

Similar points could be made about the remainder of Kahane's candidates: understanding, privacy, and solitude. Understanding, either construed merely as an increase in one's information or more specifically as knowledge of certain kinds of information (e.g., virtue, wisdom, etc.), is a plausible candidate for a moral good because possessing information is useful for agents as they pursue their own flourishing. Privacy, understood as having one's mental states shielded from other minds, is a plausible good given both positive and negative features of human being. Positively, the ability to have one's mental life shielded from others is a key component to individual agency that makes willing self-disclosure possible. If we lacked privacy, we would then lack agency with respect to self-disclosure. We could neither choose with whom to share information about ourselves nor what information to share, and a key identifying marker of individuality would be lost. Negatively, the ability to have one's mental life shielded from others prevents one from being associated or identified with one's fleeting unsavory thoughts generated from either reflective or pre-reflective cognitive processes. The possibility of solitude, of truly being alone should we so choose, is also, plausibly, a good state of affairs. It's easy to imagine examples where solitude contributes to one's own well-being and, as such, being prevented from experiencing solitude undermines our experience of well-being.

And, as with independence, God's existence constrains or prevents one from experiencing understanding, privacy, and solitude. With respect to

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<sup>17</sup>Evans, *God and Moral Obligation*, 28. See also Baruch Brody, "Morality and Religion Reconsidered," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. B. Brody (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974), quoted in Wielenberg, *Virtue and Value*, 54.

understanding, many theistic traditions will affirm in some sense the notion of God as an infinite being, the complete comprehension of whom is impossible. So, if one held that the possibility of complete understanding is part of a meaningful life, God's existence would entail that this good could never be achieved. Moreover, God's existence would compromise one's understanding in another way even if an agent doesn't desire complete understanding of the world. Suppose one holds as a good that facts, if explainable, are explainable in terms of natural causes because we have some handle on the predictable workings of some natural phenomena and the laws that govern them; call this the good of universal naturalistic explanation. Endorsing universal naturalistic explanation as a good doesn't commit one to thinking that one will ever achieve complete understanding of the world. It merely commits one to thinking that the world, if explainable, will be explainable in terms of laws, causes, and effects that are accessible because, in part, they are naturalistic. However, if God exists and is a supernatural agent who can and does override the natural powers of objects, then the good of universal naturalistic explanation cannot be achieved.

With respect to privacy, God's omnipotence would mean that true privacy can never be achieved, for any true proposition about one's mental life—including one's belief states—would be such that God knows it. Things get even more invasive with respect to privacy when considering that not only would God have at least as much knowledge about *S*'s reflective mental life as *S*, God's knowledge of *S*'s mental life far outstrips *S*'s own. Suppose something like the widely held dual-processing account of cognition is accurate. On this model, mental processes fall into one of two categories: System 1 (fast, automatic, unconscious) and System 2 (slow, reflective, conscious).<sup>18</sup> While human cognitive agents have some access to the outputs of System 1 cognition (certain reflective System 2 processes simply "read off" the pre-reflective outputs of System 1 processes), such access is limited. But God, presumably, would not be limited in access to the outputs of an agent's pre-reflective cognitive processes. The result is that God is aware of all of both an agent's pre-reflective and reflective beliefs even when the agent herself may have only dim reflective awareness of some of her pre-reflective cognitive outputs. If God exists, not only is one unable to shield one's reflective mental life from God, but God's knowledge of the outputs of one's pre-reflective cognitive processes means that God is more aware of what creatures are thinking than are creatures themselves.

With respect to solitude, God's omnipresence would entail that one can never escape the presence of God. Therefore, it would be the case that there is no location in space-time for a creature to occupy such that the creature is able to escape the presence of God.

There is a good *prima facie* case for independence, understanding, privacy, and solitude to be considered moral goods. Moreover, there is

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<sup>18</sup>See Jonathan St. B. T. Evans, "Dual-Processing Accounts of Reasoning, Judgment, and Social Cognition," *Annual Review of Psychology* 9 (2008), 255–278.

good reason to think that God's existence would constrain or prevent moral agents from experiencing those goods in any ultimate sense. Thus, if independence, understanding, privacy, and solitude are crucial for some agent's meaningful life-plan, then given the barrier God's existence would be for achieving that life-plan, it would be rational for that agent to prefer that God doesn't exist.

### III. Objections and Replies

#### III.1. The Fallibility Objection

Recall the first premise of the Meaningful Life argument:

1. If God's existence would constrain or prevent  $S$  from obtaining the goods in  $M_S$ , then God's existence would constrain or prevent  $S$  from obtaining what she thinks is a meaningful life.

I defended this premise by appealing to the definition of the set  $M_S$ , where  $M_S$  is the set of moral goods such that from some agent  $S$ 's perspective, obtaining or pursuing the goods in  $M_S$  is necessary for  $S$  to have what she thinks is a meaningful life. The consequent of (1) served as the antecedent in the next premise:

2. If God's existence constrains or prevents  $S$  from obtaining what she thinks is a meaningful life, then it's rational for  $S$  to prefer that God doesn't exist.

There are two issues that merit further scrutiny in assessing the content and plausibility of (2).

First, notice that the described criteria for a meaningful life, both in the antecedent of (2) and in the definition of  $M_S$ , are restricted to purely subjective criteria.  $S$  gets to determine membership in  $M_S$  based on whatever she thinks will constitute a meaningful life. Perhaps that determination is the result of  $S$  exercising reflective agency—she reflectively decides what is meaningful to her. Perhaps the content of  $M_S$  isn't the result of any decision on  $S$ 's part at all—perhaps her thinking  $M_S$  has the content it does is purely a result of some combination of genetic and social conditioning. Regardless of how  $S$  came to believe that  $M_S$  has the particular members it does, from  $S$ 's perspective, pursuing the goods in  $M_S$  constitutes a meaningful life. But unless  $S$ 's perspective is an infallible indicator of these sorts of things, we'll need to acknowledge the potential gap that exists between  $S$ 's perspective on what constitutes a meaningful life for  $S$ , and what actually constitutes a meaningful life for  $S$ . Suppose there's an objective, subject-independent fact concerning moral goods the pursuit or attaining of which in fact constitutes a meaningful life for  $S$ ; let " $M_S$ " name the set whose members are all and only those moral goods.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>I'm not making any claims here about whether the objective criteria for a meaningful life for  $S$  are the same criteria for any or all other agents.

Now a crucial question emerges: for any agent  $S$ , what's the relationship between the sets  $M_S$  and  $*M_S$ ? A strong reason for thinking that it's possible for  $M_S$  and  $*M_S$  to have different members is that we seem prone to error when it comes to determining what will constitute a meaningful life. The following scenario not only seems merely logically possible, but one that is quite common:

I used to think that pursuing and achieving goods  $X$ ,  $Y$ , and  $Z$  would constitute a meaningful life, but it turned out I was wrong. I achieved goods  $X$ ,  $Y$ , and  $Z$  to a high degree and on a scale beyond what I'd dared to dream, and yet it didn't give me the kind of satisfying life I thought it would. In fact, getting the kind of life I thought I wanted actually seemed to make life less worth living, not more. When I look back and think about that time in my life, the best way to make sense of what was going on was that I was mistaken about what would yield a meaningful life. It's not as if  $X$ ,  $Y$ , and  $Z$  were meaningful for a time and then ceased to be meaningful because the criteria for a meaningful life changed over time. Instead, it seems overwhelmingly the case that I was just mistaken about what would generate a meaningful existence.

The upshot for assessing the Meaningful Life Argument is that we can now see more clearly that premises (1) and (2) focus on subjective and fallible judgments about what constitutes a meaningful life, and therefore the sense of rationality in the consequent of (2) is clearly *internal rationality*, where  $S$ 's belief that  $p$  is internally rational if  $p$  coheres and/or follows from  $S$ 's phenomenal or doxastic experience regardless of whether the experiences themselves are well-formed, epistemologically speaking. So, even granting premise (2) according to which God's existence might make it internally rational for  $S$  to prefer that God not exist because God's existence prevents  $S$  from achieving what she *thinks* will constitute a meaningful life, this is no guarantee that God's existence would *actually* prevent  $S$  from obtaining a meaningful life. That is, (2) is consistent with the following proposition:

(2') If God's existence constrains or prevents  $S$  from obtaining what she thinks is a meaningful life,  $S$  is still able to pursue and achieve the goods in  $*M_S$  and have a meaningful life.

The strength of any particular version of the Meaningful Life Argument Template will depend on the degree of support one has for thinking that one has accurately identified the goods necessary for obtaining a meaningful life. Given the fallibility of such judgments, more work needs to be done than simply articulating a purely subjective list.

### III.2. The Moral Goods Objection

Recall that according to (4) of the Meaningful Life Argument:

4. God's existence would constrain or prevent  $S$  from obtaining some of the goods in  $M_S$ .

Recall also that Kahane's candidates for goods such that God's existence constrains or prevents one from obtaining them were independence, understanding, privacy and solitude. According to the Moral Goods objection, substituting Kahane's candidates for the goods mentioned in (4) results in (4)'s being true only if one requires that independence, understanding, privacy and solitude be experienced to an ultimate and total degree. However, the objector continues, there are good reasons to think that when it comes to these particular goods, it is better to experience them in proximate, restricted degrees as opposed to experiencing them in an ultimate, unrestricted way.

For example, consider independence. Even if God exists, one is able to experience a high degree of independence. When looking at typical development over human lifespan, one sees a progression from complete and total dependence on others to greater degrees of independence, and, relative to one's particular end of life circumstances, a regression to further dependence on others. Nothing about God's existence would seem to preclude one from experiencing high degrees of independence and autonomy. God's existence *would* entail that one is dependent on another for one's coming into existence, but that would be true even if there is no God, for no contingent human being is a completely independent being. Again, perhaps the most troubling consequence of God's existence with respect to independence is the notion that one is, ultimately, subordinate to another. For if God exists, I would then be subordinate to a maximally great being and the facts about what constitutes a meaningful and flourishing life for me are determined neither by me nor by nature but by God. However, if my perspective on the nature of human flourishing is fallible and limited, prone to all sorts of biases that stem from shortcomings—including moral shortcomings—it is an open question whether subordination to a maximally great being is less valuable than complete autonomy. At the very least, it is difficult to see the immediate advantage of complete independence from a maximally great God, if such a God indeed does exist.

God's existence was said to compromise the good of total understanding in two ways: by ensuring that some aspect of the world—namely God—will never be understood because of God's infinite nature, and by introducing an element to the world that defies predictable, naturalistic explanation. However, it seems unfair to uniquely blame God for the inability of finite creatures to gain total understanding of the universe, for it's a conceptual truth on both theism and atheism that finite creatures are limited.

With respect to privacy, it can be disconcerting to religious believers and disbelievers alike to think that one's innermost thoughts are or have been laid bare to another. Religious believers can find this disconcerting due to feelings of shame and remorse when reflecting on one's own evil thoughts, either spontaneous or calculated, and subsequently believing that God knows all. No one likes to be "found out," particularly if one has reason to think that a violation of privacy gives another information about

oneself that will be utilized in a negative way. However, is privacy really that significant a good when the “privacy invader” is God, a perfectly good moral agent? It doesn’t seem so. One’s inability to shield information doesn’t result in God’s compromising God’s moral agency, and thus is nothing to be feared. A more remarkable good on theism, more significant than the good of privacy, would be the good of a perfectly good God who knows finite creatures in every respect, including the darkness of their own hearts, and yet still acts lovingly toward them.

With respect to solitude, it’s true that God’s omnipresence entails that one can never be truly alone. However, it is interesting to compare the concept of God’s omnipresence with concerns and reflections on God’s apparent hiddenness.<sup>20</sup> Many wish to have a deeper awareness of the presence of God, if any there be, and yet are unable to attain that awareness. Thus, it would seem that while in a metaphysical sense, complete and utter solitude is impossible if God exists, one is still able to experience a high degree of solitude.

### *Conclusion*

Personal anti-theism is the view that God’s existence would make life worse overall for oneself. The Meaningful Life Argument shows one way in which personal anti-theism could be justified. However, the Meaningful Life Argument can only possibly deliver the relatively low-grade justification that stems from a subject’s having internally rational beliefs. Moreover, as we’ve seen by looking at Kahane’s candidates for goods such that God’s existence precludes obtaining them to a maximal degree, presenting any candidates for such goods requires further support to show that obtaining those goods in a way that God’s existence would prevent is worthwhile for obtaining a meaningful life.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>See J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

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