

## On the Unimportance of Theistic Belief

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### ABSTRACT

We first argue that there are cases of “blameless non-belief.” That is, some people—through no fault of their own—fail to enter into a conscious relationship with God. But if so, then it would be unjust of God to make certain particular goods (e.g., one’s salvation, the possibility of an ethical or a meaningful life, or entrance into heaven) depend upon one having a conscious relationship with God. So, given that God is just, then despite what some theists believe, a relationship with God (even assuming that God exists) cannot be a necessary condition for the attainment of these goods; there might, e.g., be atheists in heaven, even assuming that theism is true. This implies that religion is a far less important component of people’s lives than many might think.

### Keywords

God, theology, divine hiddenness, religious epistemology,  
religious pluralism, soteriology, the meaning of life

### Introduction

We argue that if God exists, then—contrary to a variety of theological perspectives—theistic belief cannot be a unique source of important goods. In section one, we argue that there are cases of “blameless non-belief.” That is, there are some individuals who, through no fault of their own, do not believe in God. In section two, we argue that given that God is just, instances of blameless non-belief imply that a relationship with God cannot be a necessary condition for the attainment of certain goods, e.g., salvation, an ethical or meaningful life, or entrance into heaven. In section three, we conclude by discussing additional implications.

### Blameless non-belief

It appears that there are cases of “blameless non-belief.” In other words, there are some who do not believe that God exists and this absence of belief is not their fault. Their non-belief does not stem from any moral, cognitive or epis-

temological failing on their part; indeed, their non-belief arises through factors that are outside of their control. In short, there are at least some non-theists who cannot reasonably be “blamed” for their non-theism.

Traditionally, many religions maintained theistic belief is compulsory and disbelief blameworthy; that is, there are no cases of blameless non-belief. But note that a majority of ethicists claim that if one ought to  $x$ , then one can  $x$  (“ought implies can”). The conjunct of these claims, that there are no cases of blameless non-belief and ought implies can, entails that theistic belief must be possible for all people. Yet some have claimed that they are simply unable to believe God exists. For example, Christopher Hitchens writes, “[w]e [atheists] are those who Blaise Pascal took into account when he wrote to the one who says, ‘I am so made that I cannot believe,’” and moreover:

there is no need for us to gather every day, or every seven days, or on any high and auspicious day, to proclaim our rectitude or to grovel and wallow in our unworthiness. We atheists do not require any priests, or any hierarchy above them, to police our doctrine. [...] To us no spot on earth is or could be ‘holier’ than another (2007, 6–7).

For Hitchens, some lack the ability and even the desire to believe God exists. He muses, “I now know enough about all religions to know that I would always be an infidel at all times and in all places” (2007, 11). But perhaps his non-belief was his fault; Hitchens might have been overly resistant to theism, too stubborn to accept that God exists or perhaps, as some reformed theologians claim, sin blocked Hitchens’s ability to perceive God.

Nevertheless, Hitchens is not alone in his assertion that some are simply unable to believe theism; Hume made a similar—though much stronger—claim. In a 1743 letter to William Mure of Caldwell, Hume describes an “objection both to devotion and prayer, and indeed to everything we call religion” (1932, 50). Of course, for Hume, our actions spring from our passions and not from reason alone; in turn, our passions can only be excited either by the senses or by ideas from the imagination or the understanding (Hume 1739, 458–459). Yet God is “no object of the senses or the imagination, and very little of the understanding” (Hume 1932, 51). Thus, God, as non-sensual, impossible to imagine, and barely understandable cannot excite any affection or passion within us. Hume draws an analogy between our relationship to God and our relationship to a distant ancestor. We might know about a distant ancestor if they left us “Estates and Honours,” but it is impossible for us to feel any affection toward them given their distance from us (Hume 1932, 51; also see, e.g., 1739, 580–581). And God, as an “invisible infinite Spirit,” is further away from us than any human ancestor; human ancestors are a finite distance away, but God is infinitely far from us. Hume writes:

a man, therefore, may have his Heart perfectly well disposed towards every

proper and natural Object of Affection, Friends, Benefactors, Country, Children andc, and yet from this Circumstance of the Invisibility and Incomprehensibility of the Deity may feel no Affection towards him (1932, 51).

Thus, even a well-adjusted person with typical cognitive function might be unable to be stirred properly to worship. Hume then argues the religious “mightily deceive themselves” because, despite their self-identifications, the religious do not actually believe God exists. For Hume, God is too far removed from any object of experience to entice us to worship or devotion. If no one can really believe that God exists, then those who disbelieve are not culpable for their disbelief: “a natural infirmity can never be a crime” (1932, 51).

Although Hume’s epistemology is rejected by many, his argument remains relevant. Since the early 1990s, Schellenberg (1996; 2010), Drange (1998), Draper (2002), Maitzen (2006), and others have argued that the existence of non-believers undermines theism. However, we will *not* argue for atheism. In the remainder of this section, we argue for a much weaker claim: there are in fact cases of blameless non-belief, a conclusion that—taken in isolation—is of course logically consistent with both the existence and non-existence of God.

But first, note that if we have no control whatsoever over what we believe, then given that ought implies can, we are not responsible for our beliefs. If not, then one is not responsible for failing to believe in God’s existence; blameless non-belief would trivially exist. So, we will assume that belief is, at least to some extent, a choice, and that doxastic involuntarism—the thesis that beliefs are never the voluntary result of the will—is false. To be clear, this assumption only helps our opponent, because again, if it is false, our claim is trivially correct.

While we assume doxastic involuntarism is false, we do not assume *all* beliefs are possible for everyone. Suppose, for example, humans possess libertarian free-will and Sarah lacks legs. Due to Sarah’s disability, she cannot jump; yet her inability to jump does not entail Sarah lacks free-will. Instead, Sarah is so constituted that she cannot jump, but Sarah can freely perform other actions. Similarly, we may imagine Ralph, who is visiting a room with four-foot tall ceilings. Ralph cannot jump, not because of his constitution, but because of the restrictions of his environment. Ralph’s situation renders jumping impossible. Likewise, assuming beliefs can be formed voluntarily does not entail we can believe absolutely anything. Indeed, as we argue below, we might be constituted or situated such that theistic belief is prevented; if so, theistic non-belief is not always blameworthy.

*The Humean argument for blameless non-belief*

Hume's 1745 letter to Mure argues for blameless non-belief; but Hume also argues for blameless non-belief elsewhere. We expand on Hume's argument and briefly summarize its connection to contemporary cognitive science of religion.

In Hume's account of the history of religion, the gods humans endorse have oscillated between this-worldly and other-worldly (several sections in his *Natural History of Religion* are relevant, but especially Section VIII), neither of which are stable and both are problematic. Examples of this-worldly gods include the pagan gods of the ancient Egyptians, Romans, and Greeks, but also saints and angels. Other-worldly gods include the official deities of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theology, understood to be categorically "Other" from the creaturely realm.

For Hume, other-worldly gods cannot sustain belief because, as noted above, they cannot move people to proper worship. Worse, a god too radically transcendent might be indistinguishable from the mysterious impersonal forces which formed our universe on materialistic accounts (Hume 1779, 236–241; also see Hume's footnote on 241). Nonetheless, the religious are moved to exalt their deity to ever more transcendent heights (Hume 1779, 238; Hume 1854, throughout, but especially section VIII). Hume argues the more pious the theist, the more exalted their deity becomes; but the more transcendent, the less distinguishable from atheism and the less suitable for devotion. But this-worldly gods are idolatrous and not the proper object for devotion or worship either. The gods ancient polytheists worshipped were more like legendary creatures, such as gnomes or leprechauns, than they were like the monotheistic God. We would identify anyone who endorsed gnomes and leprechauns, but not God, as a *superstitious atheist* (Hume 1854, 434–435); so, idolatry can be a species of atheism, too.

Theologian Paul Tillich formulated a related argument. Tillich (1952) argued that God is the "God above God," which means God transcends any conception humans have ever had; God cannot properly be conceived of in creaturely categories or language. For example, on Tillich's view, God, as the creator and ground of all being, is not a being among other beings. Tillich identifies as atheistic those who view God as just another being: "it is as atheistic to affirm the existence of God as it is to deny it. God is being-itself, not *a* being" (1951, 237). For Tillich, the God of traditional theism must be transcended to reach divinity sufficient for our existential needs. However, perhaps unsurprisingly, Tillich's God is notoriously difficult to understand. Though Tillich, unlike Hume, argues for the possibility of a genuine theism, Tillich maintains that our culture's preoccupation has been with an idolatrous God atheists rightfully reject (1952, 182–183). In other words, for Tillich,

most conceptions of God are crude idolatries not capable of sustaining us existentially; thus, many rightfully—and so presumably blamelessly—deny God exists.

For Hume, both this-worldly and other-worldly Gods are unstable and fail to promote theistic belief of the proper sort; genuine Christian theism is impossible. Instead, we lapse into superstition and enthusiasm, as Hume describes Catholics and Protestants. Elsewhere, Hume remarks that anyone genuinely “moved to [Christian] faith” would be “conscious of a continued miracle in his [*sic*] own person [...] subvert[ing] all the principles of his understanding, and giv[ing] a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience” (2006, 544). Hume did not believe such subversions of our understanding, custom, or experiences are possible; thus, genuine theism is impossible. But if Hume is right that genuine theism is impossible, or if Tillich is right that those who reject currently prominent conceptions of God are justified in doing so, then it appears blameless non-belief exists.

The instability of belief in otherworldly and transcendent beings is consistent with contemporary psychological research. Psychologists Justin Barrett and Frank Keil performed a series of experiments that examined various conceptions of God held by religious individuals (see, for example, Barrett *et al*, 1996). Barrett and Keil presented college students with stories involving God, then asked them questions about the stories to ascertain their conceptions of God. The college students offered an other-worldly conception of God (God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, atemporal, non-spatial, categorically other, etc) when filling out a *questionnaire* about their religious beliefs, but when examining a story ambiguous between a this-worldly and other-worldly God, they provided responses consistent with a this-worldly God. In other words, when using their knowledge of God to evaluate stories, the students often thought of God as a “Big Person.” Although paying lip service to the official views of their respective religions, the students easily slipped into idolatry.

Moreover, the history and demographics of religion offer further support for Hume’s view. Most believers in supernatural entities have not been Tillichians, Thomists, Swinburnians, Plantingians, or whatever, but believed that God was similar to other sorts of agents. For example, theists often identify God as sharing their political beliefs or as concerned with earthly affairs. Indeed, the Biblical authors agreed that proper theism is unstable and depicts the ancient Israelites repeatedly slipping into idolatry. The notion that God is other-worldly is central to Christian revelation. For example, John tells us that the Father is forever inaccessible and hidden from humankind. The Son, as God’s earthly incarnation and revelation to humankind, provides the unique way in which we can access God. According to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation: “No one has ever seen God. It is God

the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1:18).

This all raises a question for theists: if God created and designed us to love God, why did God render us with so little ability to be proper theists? Some theists (i.e. apophatic pluralists, like John Hick or Kenneth Rose) are comfortable asserting that all the various conceptions of God point to the same underlying Divine reality, while others are not. The data discussed above is unexpected on conceptions in which God desired us to hold certain ideas concerning God's nature, but expected on conceptions in which God is indifferent as to which religious notions we maintain.

### *Maitzen's argument from demography*

Consider, for example, the problem of Divine Hiddenness alluded to above. The problem of Divine Hiddenness is generally formulated as an argument for atheism: the fact that not everyone believes in God implies the non-existence of God. McCormick claims that a

recent group of inductive atheistic arguments has focused on widespread non-belief itself as evidence that atheism is justified. The common thread in these arguments is that something as significant in the universe as God could hardly be overlooked [...] a being such as God, if he chose, could certainly make his existence manifest to us. Creating a state of affairs where his existence would be obvious, justified, or reasonable to us, or at least more obvious to more of us than it is currently, would be a trivial matter for an all-powerful being. So since our efforts have not yielded what we would expect to find if there was a God, then the most plausible explanation is that there is no God. (2010)

And Meister states,

Many people are perplexed and see as problematic that, if God exists, God does not make his existence sufficiently clear and available [...] If God exists as the perfect, loving, omnibenevolent being that theists have generally taken God to be, then God would desire the best for his creatures. The best for God's creatures, at least in the Christian religion and to some extent in all of the Abrahamic traditions, is to be in relationship with God. However, many people, both non-theists and sometimes theists themselves, claim to have no awareness of God. Why would God remain hidden and elusive, especially when individuals would benefit from being aware of God? (2012)

In short, it appears that a loving God would want all of us to believe in her; but not everyone does believe, which can be taken as evidence that God does not exist. However, we do not advance Divine Hiddenness considerations as an argument for atheism. Rather, we suggest that, at minimum, Hiddenness considerations suggest a weaker claim than atheism: because God is "hidden" from some, plausibly, their non-belief is not their fault. That is, Divine Hiddenness gives us a reason to suspect that there are at least some cases of blame-

less non-belief.

For example, consider the “Demographics of Theism” problematic, which can be understood as a particular version of Divine Hiddenness. Maitzen (2006), who offers an intriguing discussion of the Demographics of Theism problem, points out that the geographic distribution of theistic belief is extremely irregular; some countries contain mostly theists while other countries contain relatively few theists. For example,

the populace of Saudi Arabia is at least 95 percent Muslim and therefore at least 95 percent theistic, while the populace of Thailand is 95 percent Buddhist and therefore at most 5 percent theistic. The approximate total populations are 26 million for Saudi Arabia and 65 million for Thailand. (Maitzen 2006, 179).

While it is puzzling that God would not reveal his existence to everyone in and of itself, it is *extremely* puzzling that God would reveal his existence to some geographical areas at a much higher rate than in others. Maitzen (2006) argues that some theistic responses to the problem of Divine Hiddenness seek to blame the non-believer for their lack of belief, but these strategies are not plausible when discussing the Demographics of Theism. We do not choose where we are born, so it is difficult to see how someone can be blamed for being born in a predominately non-theistic country, and hence less likely to believe in God. That is, there are cases of blameless non-belief.

### *The argument from the history of religion*

While Maitzen focuses on the *geographical* irregularities of theistic belief, one could also discuss the *temporal* irregularities of theistic belief. Quite simply, the degree to which the world is theistic has changed over time as well. For most of human history, God, as understood by twenty-first century theists and as defined by classical theism, was unknown to humankind. All three major Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) originate within the last 3000 years. Think, for example, of the many that were born before monotheism became widespread. Just as we do not choose *where* we are born, we do not choose *when* we are born. As a result, it seems difficult to blame someone for not being a theist when their non-theism was primarily a function of when they were born. Consider, for example, some hypothetical person born before monotheism became widespread. Had this person been born, say, a hundred years ago, they would have believed in God; indeed, they would have devoted their life to religion, perhaps becoming a Pope, a priest, an influential minister, or some other key figure in the church. Yet, simply because of the time in which they were born, they did not become a theist. It is difficult to see how this person can rationally be blamed for their non-belief. That is, we seem to have a case of blameless non-belief.

*The argument from autism*

Recent work in cognitive science and psychology suggests that theory of mind plays an important role in the formation of theistic belief and in the formation of supernatural beliefs more generally. For example, autistic individuals possess a diminished theory of mind in certain respects (hypoactive agency detection) and theism occurs at a lower frequency in autistic individuals than in neurotypical individuals (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2009; Gervais 2013, 18). But those with an exaggerated theory of mind (hyperactive agency detection)—e.g. schizophrenics—tend to over-detect agency in the world. That is, supernatural beliefs, and other beliefs in unseen agents (e.g. conspiracies, etc.), are exaggerated in schizophrenic individuals. Neither schizophrenics nor those with autism are culpable for their respective cognitive conditions. To the extent that autistic individuals possess less aptitude for theistic belief and schizophrenic individuals possess greater aptitude for belief in theologically unacceptable gods, autistic and schizophrenic individuals are not responsible for their disbelief. That is, we have still more examples of blameless non-belief.

*The argument from psychopathy*

Psychopaths are individuals who, for neurophysiological reasons, are incapable of feeling empathy or guilt and therefore lack the kind of moral experience had by others. While Erik Wielenberg discusses the existence of psychopaths as evidence contrary to C. S. Lewis's moral argument for God's existence (Wielenberg 2008, 80–82; Lewis 2001, 3–32), Wielenberg's discussion also suggests another argument for blameless non-belief.

According to Wielenberg, Lewis's moral argument purports to show that various facts about our moral experience are evidence for theism. According to Lewis, we feel within ourselves an obligation to a higher power and recognize right and wrong. Furthermore, Lewis maintained that our recognition of right and wrong is universal and a priori. As Paul wrote in Romans, our moral experience might suggest that God wrote the moral law on our hearts. Perhaps we are drawn towards Christianity due to our desire for forgiveness and the recognition of our moral failings. If these experiences were universal, they might count as evidence that humans were designed by a perfectly good creator who cared about morality and desired a personal relationship with all humans.

However, some—such as psychopaths—do not recognize the moral law in the manner Lewis described, and so undermine the purported universality of moral experience; some do not recognize their moral failings, and so undermine the notion that all humans are called to Christianity by recognizing their moral failings and desiring forgiveness. The psychopath's inability to



experience morality in the same way as the rest of humanity is constitutional; Wielenberg quotes psychologist Robert Hare, who argues that the psychopath's inability to "see" morality is analogous to the colour-blind individual's inability to see colour (2008, 81). Thus, psychopaths differ in important respects from those who are merely mistaken about what they ought to do and who, on Lewis's account, know deep within themselves that they have acted inappropriately:

what was the sense in saying the enemy [in World War 2] were in the wrong unless Right is a real thing which the Nazis at bottom knew as well as we did and ought to have practiced? If they had had no notion of what we mean by right, then, though we might still have had to fight them, we could no more have blamed them for that than for the colour of their hair (2001, 5).

Lewis claims there might be individuals who, like the colour blind or the tone deaf, have no sense of morality (you might "find an odd individual here and there who did not know" the moral law; 2001, 5), but Lewis does not explain possible implications of this for theism.

Wielenberg notes that the existence of psychopaths might count as evidence against classical theism. While Wielenberg states he is "not sure that this objection is decisive, primarily because of the possibility of a justification for psychopathy that lies beyond our understanding" (2008, 82), the compatibility between psychopaths and classical theism is an interesting question for future research. But, *we* do not claim or even suggest that the existence of psychopaths counts as evidence for atheism (although it might, for all we know). Instead, we suggest that insofar as moral experience is a crucial piece of evidence for God's existence and insofar as our recognition of our moral failings draws us to Christianity, those for whom moral experience and the recognition of their moral failings is absent might not be responsible for their non-belief. If it is true God wrote the moral law on our hearts so that we might believe, then quite plausibly, God does not expect individuals in whose hearts the moral law is absent to believe.

### *Clarifications*

We've discussed five distinct arguments for the existence of blameless non-belief. However, note a few things. *First*, the arguments given above are not intended to be *exhaustive*; indeed, there might be additional reasons for suspecting that there are cases of blameless non-belief. For example, perhaps someone's parents are determined to raise an atheist, so they brainwash their child into being one. If not for this anti-religious indoctrination, the person would have been religious. It seems difficult to fault this person for not believing. Or perhaps someone is born into a cult, and has little or no contact with the outside world. Or perhaps someone (e.g., a liberator of a concentration camp) witnesses evils so horrific that they cannot help but find some

version of the argument from evil persuasive. Or less dramatically, perhaps there are atheists who are open to belief, and might even prefer to believe, but simply cannot bring themselves to do so for reasons that are outside of their control. *Second*, note that our argument below does not depend upon the claim that there are *no* cases of blameworthy non-belief; our argument is consistent with some non-theists being responsible for their non-belief. *Third*, our argument does not even depend upon blameless non-belief being *widespread*. Indeed, our argument can succeed if there has just been a *single* case of blameless non-belief throughout human history; a claim that, given the various arguments above, appears plausible.

### The argument

In section one, we argued there are cases of blameless non-belief. We now argue the existence of blameless non-belief entails the following CLAIM:

if God exists, then being a theist is not a necessary condition to obtain various important goods including—though perhaps not limited to—salvation, an ethical or meaningful life, or entrance into heaven.

Note that CLAIM does not concern the existence or non-existence of God; CLAIM is consistent with both theism and atheism. As mentioned above, the concept of blameless non-belief, or even non-belief in general, is sometimes used in arguments for atheism; but we will not argue for atheism. Our point is that *even if* God exists, being a theist is not a necessary condition for the attainment of certain goods; some theists think that theism is necessary to attain certain particular goods, but we deny this. CLAIM is also consistent with theism being a necessary condition for the attainment of some goods, whatever they might be. Our argument applies to particular goods that intuitively should be attainable by everyone if God is just: e.g., salvation, the chance to lead an ethical or meaningful life, and the opportunity to enter heaven and avoid damnation. It might be, for all we know, that there are some other goods that one must be a theist to attain and this state of affairs is consistent with God's existence. Moreover, we leave the question of whether theism is a sufficient condition to attain these goods aside.

The first premise of the “argument from insignificance” is an assumption for *reductio*; suppose that,

1. (i) God exists and (ii) as some theists believe, being a theist is a necessary condition to obtain certain important goods (e.g., salvation, the avoidance of hell, a meaningful life, true happiness, and so on).

Of course, an assumption for *reductio* needs no justification. But God—a perfect being—is perfectly just. That is,

2. If God exists, then God is just.

The second premise is true by definition given classical theism. Of course, 1 and 2 entail,

3. God is just.

But,

4. If God is just, then it is not the case that being a theist is a necessary condition to obtain various important goods (salvation, the avoidance of hell, a meaningful life, true happiness, and so on).

The thought here is straightforward. As discussed above, many people fail to believe in God through no fault of their own; the circumstances that led to their non-belief (e.g., when or where they were born, the constitution of their cognitive apparatus, etc.) are or were entirely outside of their control. But if so, then since God is responsible for these circumstances (e.g., presumably God could have eliminated autism), i.e., since God is responsible—in a sense—for their non-belief (at least to a greater degree than they are), it would be unjust of God to make theism a necessary condition for the attainment of goods that should be at least potentially available to all. Consider, e.g., Pope John Paul II. And now suppose, e.g., that John Paul II was born before the spread of monotheism instead of in twentieth century Poland; consequently, he never became a theist, although he obviously would have under different circumstances. It would be unjust of God, for instance, to send John Paul II to Hell (or to make his life meaningless, or immoral and so on) in this scenario for lacking theistic belief. John Paul II's damnation would depend upon something entirely outside of his control, the presumably contingent circumstances of his birth. Likewise, if autistic individuals are indeed less likely to believe in God because of their autism, which is outside of their control, it would be unjust for God to send an autistic individual to hell, or to make their lives meaningless, or to make it impossible for them to be moral etc., simply because of their non-belief. Imagine a game that the players are forced to play, one in which the winners receive a great prize but the losers do not (indeed, perhaps the losers are even punished for losing). And further imagine that some of the players of the game have absolutely no chance to win; indeed, the reasons for which they have no chance to win are seemingly arbitrary and entirely outside of their control. One could not reasonably call this game "fair" or "just"; it is the very definition of unfair. But given blameless non-belief, this is how life would be if theism is a necessary condition for the attainment of certain goods. One might think that standard replies to the argument from evil can undermine this premise; but as we argue below, they do not. Given (ii) (in 1) and 4 we can infer,

5. God is not just.

A contradiction, so 1 must be false. So, one of the conjuncts in 1 must be false: either God does not exist or else being a theist is not a necessary con-

dition to obtain various important goods (salvation, the avoidance of hell, a meaningful life, true happiness, and so on). Equivalently,

6. If God exists, then being a theist is not a necessary condition to obtain various important goods.

Of course, 6 is CLAIM. The argument is clearly valid. Step 1 requires no justification; step 2 is true by definition; steps 3, 5 and 6 follow from other steps with basic logic; so, step 4 appears to be the only potentially problematic step.

### *Objections and Clarifications*

Some will take issue with step 4. One might object: those who are unable to believe might suffer in certain ways that believers do not, but perhaps God has a *sufficient reason* for allowing some to suffer more. Perhaps, for example, allowing some to suffer in ways that some others do not is necessary for God to bring about some greater good. Perhaps, while some suffer through no fault of their own, this suffering is not gratuitous, at least. Perhaps—as the sceptical theist will claim—God has sufficient reasons for allowing some to suffer in ways that others do not and moreover, we are unable to know what these reasons are. More broadly, perhaps one can simply adapt the responses theists typically give to arguments from evil (be they logical arguments or evidential arguments) to our argument.<sup>1</sup>

It is not clear, however, that one can simply apply the standard defences and theodicies to our argument; the argument is very different than arguments from evil. In arguments from evil, the relevant divine properties are omnipotence, omniscient and omnibenevolence; it is claimed that these three properties, when combined with some of the evil in the world, either generate a contradiction or at least make it less (epistemically) probable that God exists. But the relevant divine property for our argument is God's alleged *justness*. Indeed, arguments from evil and the argument for insignificance have different conclusions: unlike arguments from evil, our argument does not argue that God does not exist or is less likely to exist given some of the evil in the world; our argument makes no claims about the existence or non-existence of God. Our argument is not even concerned with *suffering per se*; it is about *fairness*. Note that even if the actual world contains no gratuitous suffering at all, and so arguments from evil ultimately fail, our argument could still be

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1 Of course, logical arguments from evil (see, e.g., Mackie (1955) and McCloskey (1960) argue that the existence of God and the existence of at least some of the evil in the actual world would entail a contradiction, so God cannot exist. Evidential arguments from evil, e.g. Rowe (1978; 1979; 1988; 1996) and Draper (1989) argue that the existence of at least some of the evil in the actual world makes the existence of God less (epistemically) probable.

sound; it might be that the blameless non-believer does not suffer from their non-belief, but, rather, their life lacks some good though they are blissfully unaware of it. Likewise, it might be that there is no gratuitous suffering in the world insofar as all suffering is necessary to bring about some greater good, but it is still *unfair* that some lives lack an important good while others do not. And consider sceptical theism, for example. It might be that God has a reason for allowing some lives to lack something of importance, but that does not imply that God's acting on these reasons is *fair*. A good might be brought about that wouldn't otherwise exist in an unfair way; acting unjustly for a reason (whether we can know what that reason is or not) is still acting unjustly. In sum, even assuming that some traditional responses to arguments from evil work, arguments from evil and our argument are so different there is no reason to think both arguments can be refuted with the same responses.

The theist might grant that there are important differences between arguments from evil and our argument, but still insist that there is a sceptical theist type response our argument. For example, while it might *appear* that God treats blameless non-believers unjustly, God is in fact treating them justly; it is simply difficult or impossible for us to see this. God knows everything and we are limited, so perhaps what appears unfair from our perspective is not unfair from God's perspective, and so is not unfair at all. However, when one examines this possible response, it appears untenable. Either people are being penalized by God for something that is not their fault or not. If not, then they are in fact not being treated differently than believers; but then it must be that the lives of blameless non-believers do not lack any important goods simply because of their non-belief. But if one's life lacks no goods because of one's non-belief, then belief is not necessary for these goods, and our conclusion stands. The other possibility is that people *are* being penalized by God for something that is not their fault; their lives do lack important goods through no fault of their own. But this would appear to be the very *definition* of "unjustness;" so it is difficult to see how this situation could be just, even from God's perspective. That is, given the way *humans* understand 'justness,' or given the *human* definition of "justness," punishing blameless non-believers for their non-belief would seem to be a paradigmatic example of unjustness. So if we are wrong in judging this unjust, we must have little or even no idea what "justness" even means; indeed, "justness" would appear to mean the *opposite* of what we think it means. It is not simply that God understands things about justness that we do not; rather, it must be that the human understanding of justness is deeply flawed. But if so, then why should we think that God is just at all? How can one ascribe a property to something if one has no idea what counts as necessary and sufficient conditions for something having that property? And if "justness" means the opposite of what we think it means, and many things that we thought were unjust are just, then

should we infer that God behaves in ways that we previously thought unjust? It seems untenable. And of course, sceptical theism faces many objections of its own, so even if we assume that sceptical theism is applicable to our argument, and can be used to formulate a *coherent* objection to it, it still might not be a *forceful* objection.<sup>2</sup>

Another possible objection to our argument appeals to the Incarnation. The notion of Incarnation is at the center of several theistic traditions, each of which attempts to render the transcendent accessible by specifying a point of contact between creaturely and divine realms. For example, according to John's Gospel, as interpreted in traditional Christian theology, no one can come to the Father except through the Son. One way to understand this claim is in virtue of the notions of transcendence, ala Hume and Tillich, that we appealed to earlier. God is incomprehensible to the created intellect in the present life, in part because God constitutes a distinct genus wholly divorced from the creaturely realm. On other views of God—such as the view Hume adopts in his first *Enquiry* or that Locke adopts in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*—God belongs to the same genus as creatures, but possesses properties magnified to infinity. Neither view allows God to be directly comprehensible. However, if God incarnated as some manifestation within the creaturely realm—that is, as a finite being of the same genus—then perhaps we would have access to God, at least in virtue of God's incarnation. Christians claim that one of the three Persons of the Trinity incarnated as Jesus of Nazareth, thereby allowing access to the divine. God's incarnation could provide a disclosure of God's existence and revelation to humankind, displacing the Humean concern that, by nature, humans replace the transcendent with crude idols or the Tillichian concern that most of the objects of human worship have been mere simulacra that never fully succeeded in providing access to the "God beyond Gods." The Roman Catholic Catechism affirms this understanding of the Incarnation. In part 1, section 1, chapter 1, section 4, the Catechism states that "God transcends all creatures", that creaturely languages cannot describe God, and that God is "incomprehensible" and "ungraspable." Later, in part 1, section 1, chapter 3, article 1, paragraph 151, verse 21, the Catechism quotes John 1:18 and states, "Because he [Jesus] 'has seen the Father,' Jesus Christ is the only one who knows him and can reveal him."

However, this response fails for two reasons. First, traditional conceptions of the incarnation have supposed that the incarnation involves one person with

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2 For example, skeptical theism leaves open the possibility that God could lie or globally deceive us (Wielenberg 2010; Hudson 2014; Wilks 2014), it might make moral deliberation impossible (Sehon 2010), and it might even undermine inductive inference (Hasker 2010).

two natures, wholly human and wholly God. Supposing that God incarnated within the physical realm as Jesus of Nazareth and that the Hume-Tillich line is right about the inaccessibility of a transcendent being, we would only have access to Jesus-as-man and not Jesus-as-God. That is, our access would be limited to Jesus's humanly nature and closed to Jesus's divine nature. Either Jesus is inaccessible because Jesus is divine, in which case Jesus is not human, or Jesus is accessible because Jesus is human, in which case Jesus is not divine. Traditional models of the incarnation do not help.<sup>3</sup> On the kenotic model, the Son "empties" Himself of divine attributes when incarnating as human, suggesting that access to Jesus's earthly ministry is not at all access to the divine attributes. The two-minds model—which suggests that the Incarnate Son possessed two minds, one human and one divine—doesn't help either because, at most, we'd have indirect access to the Son's human, and not divine, mind. Still other defences of the Incarnation outright reject the law of non-contradiction; while some Christians might find this a plausible route for understanding the Trinity, we argue that the failure of the law of non-contradiction is less plausible than that God never incarnated. Our response generalizes to any theological tradition which attempts to resolve the difficulty by appealing to incarnation or to divine revelation. Insofar as the incarnation or revelation is accessible, the incarnation or revelation is not transcendent.

At this point, Christian theologians, or others who endorse a point of contact between the divine and creaturely realms within a single embodiment, might reply that we have proposed a false dichotomy. Maybe so, but attempts to show that this is a false dichotomy are not convincing. According to orthodox Christian theology, the Incarnation is a mystery of the Christian faith, available only through divine revelation and not accessible through reason. Theologian Paul Helm writes, "If Christ is the foundation, even the cornerstone, and his person as incarnate is mysterious, incomprehensible and only apprehended fitfully by our finite and sin-darkened minds, then at the foundation of our faith there is a mystery" (2015, 36). Accordingly, it is often claimed that the Incarnation is a prototypical example of a doctrine which must be held by faith. For our purposes, the appeal to mysterianism is unsatisfactory for two reasons. First, by construction, the mysterian response does not actually show that the (apparent) contradiction in the Incarnation can be resolved. Mystery-mongering might allow one to avoid confrontation with the objections raised by interlocutors, but appeals to mystery leave little reason for interlocutors to adopt one's view. Moreover, appeals to divine revelation plainly beg the question because they already assume the truth of substantive theological claims; that is, incarnational mysterianism is, at best,

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3 For an overview of various models of the Incarnation, see Werther (2017) and Drum (1910).

a *de jure* resolution, drawing on resources internal to Christian theology, but not a *de facto* resolution responsive to factors external to Christian theology. Second, the mysterian response does not succeed in showing that the Son, as God Incarnate, is accessible to the created intellect in the present life, for it leaves the doctrine of the Incarnation itself as an incomprehensible and therefore inaccessible mystery.

The second reason the Incarnation fails as a response is because the Son is not equally accessible to all humans. For example, some individuals were born before Jesus's birth or self-disclosure as God Incarnate. Other individuals were born into cultures in which Christian theism had never been transmitted. Moreover, stories about Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels, have only transmitted information about Jesus in creaturely categories. Therefore, even if we grant the Christian theologian's appeal to mysterianism, we are still left with all the problems, related to divine justice, we encountered previously. Any exclusivist soteriology is undermined by various empirical facts concerning the possibility of theistic belief (i.e., the lower occurrence of theistic belief among individuals with a diminished theory of mind or the demographics of theism), thus, so long as the Incarnation is interpreted in virtue of an exclusivist soteriology, the Incarnation cannot rescue Christian theism from the objections we've raised. But if the Incarnation is not interpreted in exclusivist terms, we are left with the view that theistic belief is not required for important axiological goods (i.e., the acceptance of Jesus as one's personal savior is not required for one's salvation or for one's desirable placement in the afterlife).

Thus far, we have focused on possible objections to step (4), but perhaps the theist could reject the claim that God is just. It isn't clear why someone would worship an unjust God, but even if we put that worry aside, there is another problem. If God is unjust, then there is still no reason to think that certain goods can only be attained if one is a theist. For if God is unjust, then for all we know, maybe, e.g., God rewards atheists with heaven and sends theists to hell. Again, God is unjust, so there is no reason to think God would bestow the alleged benefits of theism on the deserving.

One might object that perhaps religion is still necessary for the attainment of some goods, goods that perhaps need not be available to all. That might be the case. This possibility is consistent with our argument. Or perhaps the theist could claim that these blameless non-believers do in fact believe in God, but are simply not aware of it. Maybe they have an unconscious belief in God. But some of these non-believers consciously believe that they are non-theist. If they can be wrong about that, then maybe many avowed theists are actually non-theists? This objection seems to engender a radical skepticism about the veracity of one's conscious religious beliefs.



### Concluding remarks

We conclude by discussing three implications of our argument.

*First*, note that while CLAIM—when taken in isolation—is consistent with God’s existence, CLAIM, when taken in conjunction with other claims that theists sometimes make, entails that God does not exist. Sometimes theists claim that our lives will lack some good in the absence of theism. So, if one is a non-theist, then one’s life will lack some important “*x*,” whatever *x* might be. For example, some have endorsed God-based approaches to the meaning of life. Some theists think that theism is necessary for the avoidance of hell, or for an ethical life, or for some other important good. But then, if we assume that God exists, CLAIM entails that these goods do not depend upon theism. And assuming our argument is correct, then to avoid the contradiction, theists must deny that these goods depend upon theism. This could have profound implications for theism. For example, a theist cannot coherently claim—as *some* theists do claim—that theism is a necessary condition for entering heaven. If there is a heaven, then even non-theists must be able to enter.

Second, the argument we have advanced here has implications for science/religion compatibilism, the view that science and religion are compatible (herein: compatibalism). Several friends of compatibilism have argued religion offers unique access to a transcendent realm of values, purposes, virtues, or other goods. While non-theistic religions are possible, and some friends of compatibilism (i.e., Stephen Jay Gould—see his 2002) are non-theists, many of compatibilism’s friends are defenders of theistic religions. John Haught, Alister McGrath, and other compatibilists deliver their views in order to quarantine substantive theological traditions from atheistic objections rooted in science. Generally speaking, if religion is the unique sphere of value and science only deals in the descriptive, then the division between religion and science follows straightforwardly from the fact-value distinction. Of course, compatibilists need to take a further step to show that descriptive theological claims (i.e., God exists) are as immune from scientifically-based criticisms as their normative claims.

For Haught, science is silent on questions of value, purpose, meaning, or morality, but value, purpose, meaning, and morality can be found by allowing an additional transcendent layer into one’s ontology. Haught (2006) claims that this additional layer is available only through religious experience. For McGrath, science, alone, cannot meet our existential needs because science cannot deal with purpose, meaning, or morality (or, broadly speaking, value questions). Due to our human natures, we are best served by seeking out that which satisfies our existential needs. According to McGrath, what we require is an overarching worldview which both satisfies our existential

needs and explains our scientific findings in relation to everything else (see McGrath 2011b, especially chapter 7; also see McGrath 2011a). McGrath is fond of quoting C. S. Lewis, who stated that he believed in Christianity not just because it is true, but because, like the newly risen sun, by its light he can see everything else (Lewis 1980; McGrath 2011a, 103). In other words, on McGrath's view, Christian theology not only provides important axiological goods but provides an overarching view that renders all of our experience, including scientific experience, comprehensible.

In sum, according to some compatibilists, Christian belief uniquely delivers a variety of substantive goods. However, as we have argued, theism, if true, cannot uniquely deliver on substantive goods (or at least goods that should intuitively be available to all) because many blamelessly lack theistic belief. Thus, our argument undermines specifically theistic varieties of compatibilism; perhaps science and religion can still be divided, but not because theistic religions uniquely deliver on substantive goods. Supposing that theism were true, the same substantive goods should be available to anyone who blamelessly adopts metaphysical naturalism.

Third, there has been much recent discussion in philosophy of religion concerning the so-called "axiological question;" that is, apart from the question of whether God exists or not, what difference would the existence or non-existence of God make to the value of the actual world? Would God's existence make the actual world a better place than it otherwise would be, or not? That is, would it be good or bad if God exists? One might ask, more narrowly, what significance could theism have for an individual's life? That is: is being a theist good, bad, or neutral for an individual's life? Does theism affect the quality or worth of an individual life, and if so, how and why? But if we are correct, theism must be less important to one's life than some think; goods that some thought were unavailable to the non-theist are now attainable by them, assuming these goods exist at all.

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