

THE EPISTEMIC AXIOLOGY OF THEISM

Liz Jackson, Ryerson University (liz-jackson.com)

1. INTRODUCTION

Three philosophy of religion questions:

- The **ontology** of theism: does God exist?
- The **epistemology** of theism: should we believe that God exists?
- The **axiology** of theism: should we want God to exist?

Pro-theism: God's existence would be a good thing (for us). If God exists:

- there is ultimate cosmic justice
- human lives are meaningful
- no evil is gratuitous (etc.)

Anti-theism: God's existence would be a bad thing (for us). If God exists:

- this invades our privacy
- this renders morality incoherent
- some lives are meaningless and absurd (etc.)

This paper applies the axiology of theism to the epistemic realm.

The **epistemic axiology** of theism: would God's existence be an *epistemically* good thing for us?

- Epistemic pro-theism: God's existence would be an epistemically good thing for us.
- Epistemic anti-theism: God's existence would be an epistemically bad thing for us.

Goals of paper:

- Explore considerations in favor of both epistemic pro-theism and epistemic anti-theism.
- Ultimately, I'll argue for epistemic pro-theism.

2. EPISTEMIC VALUE

What is epistemically valuable?

- Instrumental vs. intrinsic
- Veritism: accuracy is the final epistemic value, and accuracy is understood in terms of gaining true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs (epistemic utility theory)
- Knowledge: is knowledge more valuable than mere true belief?
- Evidentially supported belief
- Understanding
- Possessing or exemplifying epistemic virtues
- Some or all of the above, when they contain important or significant content
- Pluralist views: There are several final epistemic values

3. EPISTEMIC ANTI-THEISM

Maitzen (2017: 132-146): The Magic Argument

Naturalism: Purposes are not fundamental. Human discovery could be limitless in depth, since at bottom, things will have a mechanical, rather than a purposeful explanation.

Super-naturalism: Purposes are fundamental and the world contains "magic". If something magical occurs, then there's no way it occurs—no manner in which it occurs, no answer to how it occurs, no mechanism by means of which it occurs—that we could scrutinize ever more deeply.

- In fact, something magical (God) stands at the foundation of the universe.

Lougheed (2020: 156-157): The Complete Understanding Argument

1. If God exists, then complete understanding is impossible.
2. A world with complete understanding is better than a world without complete understanding.
3. With respect to complete understanding, a world with God is worse than a world without God.

Worries about these arguments:

- **Worry 1)** Both authors seem to be assuming that atheism allows for complete understanding, but I'm not sure what would justify that (especially given e.g. the possibility of a sound version of the EAAN). Furthermore, is there a good mechanical explanation of, say, quantum particles? (see Crummett 2019).
- **Worry 2)** I don't see why "magic" (miracles?) would mean we can't know about or explain how something occurs. Isn't "God did it" a perfectly good/intelligible explanation? Why is that worse than a "mechanical" explanation?
- **Worry 3)** We can know about things via means other than science (see Kraay forthcoming: sec 4.3.4).
- **Worry 4)** Even if there are *some* epistemic costs to theism, but I don't think either author has fully considered all the relevant epistemic benefits.

4. EPISTEMIC PRO-THEISM

Smaller Considerations:

- **Belief in God:** If theism is true, we can truly believe / justifiably believe / maybe even know one of the most important facts about the world and our existence: that God exists (e.g. for Plantingian reasons). If theism is false, there's no such guarantee (see Kraay forthcoming: sec. 4.2.6).
- **Divine Revelation:** If theism is true, especially if God is personal, God is in the business of revealing important truths to humanity. Not only is God's revelation a pretty good epistemic source (some of the best testimony out there!) but also presumably God reveals important, rather than pointless truths.

Afterlife Considerations:

- If God exists, it's very likely there's an afterlife.
- And on most conceptions of the afterlife, the afterlife is VERY epistemically good. E.g.:
 - Christianity: The Beatific Vision (Aquinas, Boersma 2018).
 - Buddhism: Enlightenment (Wright 2016).
 - Mormonism: Can become a god (Hinckley 1995).
 - Direct access to God.
- These afterlife goods are very good on almost any notion of epistemic value.
- If theism is true, this may even be infinitely epistemically good for us (see Jackson 2021).

5. CONCLUSION

Objections:

- **Time:** is there a cost if much of the epistemic goods don't come until later?
 - Response: Depends, but either way, not clear this gives atheism a leg up over theism.
- **Hell:** would God's existence be an epistemically good thing for people who go to hell?
 - Response: I actually think annihilationism cases a bigger problem, but again, either way, theism seems to have the upper hand overall.

Questions for you:

- I may need to assume some things about God, but I want to remain as ecumenical as I can. What do I need to assume about God?
- Are there other anti-theistic epistemic considerations I haven't mentioned?
- Are there other pro-theistic epistemic considerations I haven't mentioned?

REFERENCES:

- Aquinas, Thomas. (1265–1274/1912). *Summa Theologica*. Supplement to the third part, Q92. London: Burns Oates & Washbourne.
- Boersma, Hans. (2018). *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Crummett, D. (2019) Review of Kraay, K., ed. *Does God Matter: Essays on the Axiological Consequences of Theism*. *Faith and Philosophy* 36: 396-402.
- Hinckley, Gordan B. (1995). “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” *General Relief Society Meeting* (September 23, 1995), Salt Lake City, Utah.
- Jackson, E. (2021). An Epistemic Version of Pascal’s Wager. Unpublished MS.
- Kahane, G. (2011). Should we want God to exist? *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 82: 674-696.
- Kraay, K.J. (forthcoming). *The Axiology of Theism*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Lougheed, K. (2020). *The Axiological Status of Theism and Other Worldviews*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Maitzen, S. (2018). The Problem of Magic. In K. Kraay. *Does God Matter? Essays on the Axiological Consequences of Theism*. New York: Routledge, pp. 132-146.
- Wright, Dale S. (2016). *What is Buddhist Enlightenment?* Oxford: OUP.