

THE EPISTEMIC AXIOLOGY OF THEISM

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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).

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

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

The personal, **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.

Goal of paper: argue for epistemic pro-theism.

2. EPISTEMIC VALUE

What is epistemically valuable?

- **Instrumental vs. intrinsic/final:** good because it leads to epistemic goods, vs. good itself.
- **Veritism:** accuracy is the final epistemic value, and accuracy is understood in terms of gaining true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs (epistemic utility theory)
 - Other possibilities: knowledge, evidentially supported belief, understanding, epistemic virtues, some or all of these when they contain important or significant content, pluralism.
- **Categorical vs. instrumental:** are epistemic norms preference-dependent, or the same for everyone?
- **Synchronic vs. diachronic:** is an epistemically valuable state better the longer it is held?
- Focus on *expected* epistemic value (when we are uncertain about the relevant axiological facts).

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, we are in the dark epistemically.

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)** Why think that atheism allows for complete understanding?
- **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? (Crummett 2019).
- **Worry 3)** We can know about things via means other than science (see Kraay forthcoming: sec 4.3.4).
- **Worry 4)** Adding a supernatural being to the world isn't epistemically worse for us (book analogy).

4. EPISTEMIC PRO-THEISM

Smaller Considerations:

- **Belief in God:** If theism is true, people come to believe (or 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).

Objections:

- **Time:** is there a cost if much of the epistemic goods don't come until later?
 - Response: even if the waiting period is a cost, the (infinite, or very significant finite) goods of the afterlife would still outweigh this cost.
- **Epistemic future discounting:** what if I care much less about these long-term epistemic goods?
 - Response 1: if you care somewhat about the far future, then, since the goods are *so* weighty, this should have purchase for you.
 - Response 2: if you don't care at all about the far future, you'd need a very specific discount function—a sharp drop off point that happens to occur right around your biological death. Not clear what would justify this discount function, and even then there's still a debate about whether theism's pre-mortem epistemic goods are worse than atheism's.
- **Hell:** what if universalism is false?
 - Response 1: if annihilationism is true, epistemic pro-theism still seems better (since at least some people still receive the goods of the afterlife).
 - Response 2: if some people are in hell eternally, then we still have to decide if hell is epistemically good or epistemically bad (arguably people learn things in hell). If it is, then we have to consider the population of hell vs. heaven, and if hell is as especially bad as heaven is good. So to make hell into a outweighing epistemic anti-theistic consideration, you need a number of substantial and controversial assumptions.

5. CONCLUSION

Topics for discussion:

- Do I need to make any assumptions about the concept of God?
- Are there other pro- or anti-theistic *epistemic* considerations I haven't mentioned?