

# THE AXIOLOGY OF THEISM AND THE RATIONALITY OF FAITH

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Goal: bring the axiology of theism and the faith literatures into contact with each other.

- The axiology of theism bears on the rationality of faith in an interesting way—counterevidence might not be the only thing that makes faith irrational, and the person of faith may need to take a stand on the axiology of theism.
- That said, I'll explore ways that we can affirm faith's rationality while being (relatively) ecumenical.

Four conclusions:

1. There's a debate, parallel to the question of whether faith entails belief—does faith entail desire?
2. Faith involves *conative* resilience.
3. The person with faith that God exists cannot be a strong anti-theist.
4. The *truth* of anti-theism may not render faith that God exists irrational.

## 2. THE AXIOLOGY OF THEISM

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. 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. If God exists:

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

Personal pro(anti)-theism: God's existence would be a good (bad) thing for *us*.

Impersonal pro(anti)-theism: God's existence would be a good (bad) thing for *the world*.

## 2. FAITH: DESCRIPTIVE AND NORMATIVE

### 2.1 *The Nature of Faith*

Focus on *propositional* faith. Two kinds of mental states:

- **Cognitive states:** mind to world direction of fit; represent the world (e.g. beliefs, credences, probability-beliefs)
- **Conative states:** world to mind direction of fit; inherently motivational (e.g. desires, pro-attitudes, beliefs about the good)

S has faith that p iff:

- (i) S has a positive cognitive attitude toward p (e.g. thinking p is likely, having a high credence in p, believing that p),
- (ii) S has a positive conative attitude toward p (e.g. thinking that p would be a good thing, desiring p)
- (iii) S has a commitment to p, and
- (iv) S is resilient to counterevidence against the truth of p.

**Objection:** Is (ii) too strong? E.g. what if someone doesn't want God to exist, but feels rationally compelled to commit to Christianity?

- **Response:** desiring p is consistent with a lot of other sometimes complicated things going on in your head regarding p, such as conflicting desires, lack of strong emotions regarding p, etc.

## 2.2 *The Rationality of Faith*

Natural thought: faith's rationality depends on the rationality of faith's components.

Rationality and Faith's **Cognitive** Component:

- Cognitive states aim at **the truth**. Thus, evidence that p is *true* makes a cognitive state about p rational.
- If someone's evidence decisively supports the proposition God does not exist, it seems irrational for them to have faith.
- Involves the ontology and epistemology of theism.

Rationality and Faith's **Conative** Component:

- Conative states aim at **the good**. Thus, evidence that p is *good* makes a conative state about p rational.
- If someone's evidence decisively supports the proposition God's existence would be a bad thing, it seems irrational for them to have faith.
- Involves the axiology of theism.

This doesn't mean the rationality of belief and rationality of desire are parallel in every sense. (For example, conflicting beliefs seem worse than conflicting desires.)

## 3. UPSHOTS AND CONCLUSIONS

**Upshot 1:** There's a debate, parallel to the question of whether faith entails belief—does faith entail desire?

- In the same way that people argue that states weaker than flat-out belief can play the cognitive role, maybe states weaker than flat-out desire can play the conative role.
- To what extent should we expect a belief-desire symmetry?

**Upshot 2:** Faith involves conative resilience.

- Faith that p may be resilient to evidence that p is not good.
  - Example 1: a marriage.
  - Example 2: religious commitment.

**Upshot 3:** The person of faith that God exists needs to take a stand on the axiology of theism.

- Hard to see how someone with religious faith could be a strong anti-theist.
  - Personal vs. Impersonal pro-theism? Both?

**Upshot 4:** The *truth* of anti-theism may not render faith irrational.

- **Ontological-axiological question:** Is God's existence a good thing?
- **Rationality-axiological question:** Is desiring God's existence rational?
- Someone could say no to the first, but yes to the second.