

The Epistemic Axiology of Theism



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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?

Note that you can **mix and match** these views!

The Axiology of Theism: A Brief Overview

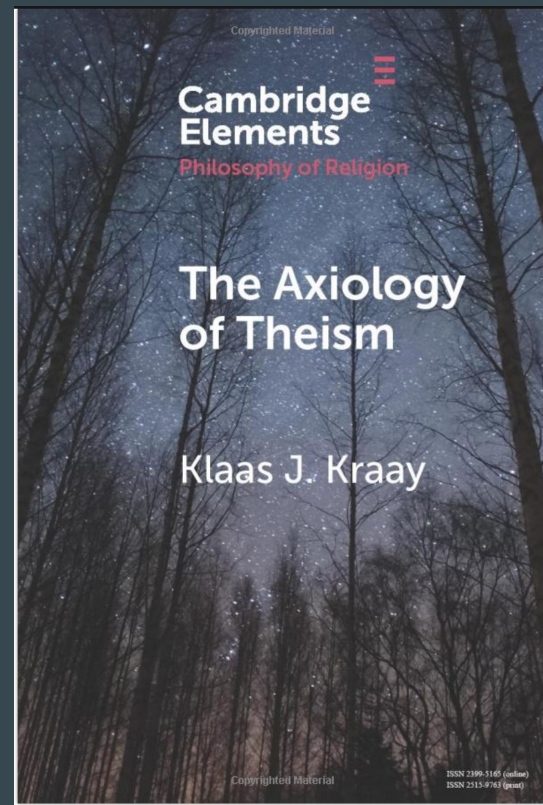
Pro-Theism: God existence would be a good thing (for us).

- There's ultimate cosmic justice.
- Human lives are meaningful.
- No evil is gratuitous (etc.).

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

- God invades our privacy.
- God renders morality incoherent.
- Some lives would be meaningless and absurd (etc.).

As indicated by the “for us” (rather than “for the world”), I’ll be focusing on **personal** strands of pro- and anti-theism.



My goal: apply the axiology of theism to the epistemic realm.

Main question involves **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.

Thesis: epistemic pro-theism is true.

- Overview of epistemic value
- Consider + respond to two anti-theistic epistemic considerations in the literature
- Argue for epistemic pro-theism (one big consideration involving the afterlife)
- Conclude with three objections (if time)

Epistemic Value

- **Instrumental good:** good because it leads to epistemic goods.
- **Intrinsic/final good:** epistemically good itself.

Possible epistemic goods:

- **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.

Epistemic Decision Theory

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I explore the prospects for modelling epistemic rationality (in the probabilist setting) via an epistemic decision theory, in a consequentialist spirit. Previous work has focused on cases in which the truth-values of the propositions in which the agent is selecting credences do not depend, either causally or merely evidentially, on the agent's choice of credences. Relaxing that restriction leads to a proliferation of puzzle cases and theories to deal with them, including epistemic analogues of evidential and causal decision theory, and of the Newcomb Problem and 'Psychopath Button' Problem. A variant of causal epistemic decision theory deals well with most cases. However, there is a recalcitrant class of problem cases for which no epistemic decision theory seems able to match our intuitive judgements of epistemic rationality. This lends both precision and credence to the view that there is a fundamental mismatch between epistemic consequentialism and the intuitive notion of epistemic rationality; the implications for understanding the latter are briefly discussed.

1. Beyond pure observation: Some puzzle cases

In most epistemological situations, the agent is a *pure observer*, in the following two senses. (1) What she believes does not causally influence the truth of the propositions that her beliefs are about. (2) While one generally hopes that the agent is more likely to believe that P if P is true than if P is false, still the fact that S believes that P on the basis of evidence E is not itself *additional* evidence in favour of, or against, P.

Interesting epistemological puzzle cases arise when the agent is *not* merely an observer: when the truth of the proposition believed *does* depend, in some stronger way than in the usual cases, on the extent to which the agent believes either that very proposition, or some other proposition. Here are a few such cases.

Promotion:

Alice is up for promotion. Her boss, however, is a deeply insecure type: he is more likely to promote Alice if she comes across as lacking in confidence. Furthermore, Alice is useless at play-acting, so she will come across that way iff she really does have a low degree of belief

Epistemic Value, cont.

- **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** (value when we are uncertain about the relevant axiological facts).



Epistemic anti-theism: two arguments



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 2021: sec 4.3.4).

Worry 4) Adding a supernatural being to the world isn't epistemically worse for us, even if that being is transcendent to a degree (book analogy).



Epistemic Pro-Theism: Two 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 2021: 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.



Epistemic Pro-Theism: Afterlife Considerations

- If God exists, it's very likely that there's some kind of **afterlife**.
- And on most conceptions of the afterlife, the afterlife is quite epistemically good. E.g.:
 - **Christianity**: The Beatific Vision (Aquinas, Boersma 2018).
 - **Islam, Judaism**: Resurrection/embodyment, unique/direct access to God.
 - **Mormonism**: Can become a god (Hinckley 1995).
 - **Shinto**: Can become a god, accessing the present world AND the hidden world of the gods.
 - **African religions**: become the “living dead” in an imperceptible earthly realm (not immortal).
 - **Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism**: reincarnation. Epistemic value of reincarnation?
 - **Buddhism**: Enlightenment (Wright 2016).
 - <https://www.global-philosophy.org/immortality>
- These afterlife goods are very good on almost any notion of epistemic value.
- On some of the above views, the afterlife may even be *infinitely* epistemically good for us.



Objections

Time: is there a cost if much of the epistemic goods don't come until later?

- **Response:** this cost would likely be outweighed by afterlife goods.

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 the weight of the future goods will still have purchase.
- **Response 2:** if you don't care at all about the far future:
 - you'd need a very specific discount function
 - not clear what would justify this discount function
 - even then, there's still a debate about premortem epistemic goods (anti-theism doesn't obviously win)

Hell: what if not everyone receives the epistemic goods?

- **Response 1:** if annihilationism is true, epistemic pro-theism still seems correct (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.



Thank you!

Questions?