

Only God Knows Best

Aspirational Theism and Epistemic Value

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Abstract: This paper develops an epistemic argument for *aspirational theism*, the view that for agents who regard theism as a live epistemic possibility, there exist defeasible reasons to rationally hope that God exists. The argument begins from the fact that finite epistemic agents must economize their cognitive resources, and thus should seek sources of substantive, rather than trivial, epistemic goods. If God exists, He would be uniquely well-positioned—given His omniscience and moral perfection—to deliver epistemic goods that are personally fitting and epistemically valuable. The paper distinguishes aspirational theism from pro- and anti-theism and aspirational atheism, situating the favored view within broader debates concerning rational hope, epistemic value, and the ethics of belief. And it engages with several objections from divine hiddenness, privacy, and pessimistic meta-induction, concluding that even under skeptical theist constraints, theistic hope remains epistemically appropriate for many.

Keywords: Aspiration theism, Hope, Privacy, Epistemic value, Junk knowledge

Hope? Let me tell you something, my friend. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane. It's got no use on the inside. You'd better get used to that idea.

Red, *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994)

1. Introduction

Philosophical discussions of God, until recently, were entwined with whether theistic belief is rational and justified (Swinburne 2010; Mackie 1982). This is no

longer the case: philosophers of religion have reoriented their focus toward the rationality of, and justification for, non-doxastic mental attitudes toward the existence of God. For example, Brian Ballard argues that the degree to which “it is good for a certain religion to be true is relevant to the epistemic rationality of faith in that religion” (2017, 213). Daniel Howard-Snyder holds that faith is “a complex propositional attitude consisting of (i) a positive evaluation of [...], (ii) a positive conative orientation toward [...], [and] (iii) a positive cognitive stance toward [...]” the object of propositional faith (2013, 370). Clifford Williams, in *Existential Reasons for Belief in God*, argues for “the legitimacy of acquiring faith through need, emotion, and reason. Satisfaction of need legitimately draws us to faith, but reason must be involved in this drawing” (2011, 1). Further, there has been a recent focus on different versions of Pascal’s Wager—Rota (2016), Jackson (2023), and Jordan (2006), to cite but a few. Lastly, Andrew Chignell argues that as philosophy of religion becomes further globalized, the focus will shift from epistemically justifying positions such as generic theism to what religious practitioners “actually hope for or accept (rather than believe ...),” thereby moving toward a non-doxastic and lived approach to the philosophical study of religion (2021,92).

Moreover, debates over rational and justified non-doxastic attitudes toward the existence of God are closely related to debates over the axiology of theism. Here, some philosophers hold that theistic worlds are objectively better than atheistic ones—call this view *pro-theism* (Kraay and Dragos 2013; Penner and Arbour 2018). Other philosophers argue that atheistic worlds are objectively better than theistic ones—call this view *anti-theism* (Nagel 1997,130; Kahane 2011). Such debates center on whether theistic or atheistic universes have more objective good-making qualities, and these discussions influence work that focuses on the rationality and justification of non-doxastic mental attitudes toward God’s existence. For example, some philosophers argue that such good-making qualities justify the rationality of hoping that God exists (Licon 2021; Jonbäck 2022).

This paper appeals to the good-making qualities of a theistic universe to argue that despite one’s view on God’s existence, *if* His existence is a live epistemic option, then there is a solid—but not decisive—epistemic argument for the view that it is rational to hope that God exists. Call this view *aspirational theism* (and the contrary view, *aspirational atheism*). A rough sketch is as follows:

Epistemic agents should avoid acquiring and storing trivial and useless epistemic items, such as knowledge and true belief, since doing so requires time, effort, and incurs opportunity costs that could instead be devoted to valuable and useful knowledge and true belief. Accordingly, we should

want a source of substantial knowledge—one that screens out trivial and useless epistemic goods. God would be the best candidate for such a role, for which one could reasonably hope. Therefore, we have epistemic reasons to hope that God exists.

To clarify, arguments from hope clearly avoid the Humean trap¹ of conflating desirability with truth—quite the contrary, in fact. Arguments from hope hold only that because we do not have the truth, we are left with mental attitudes such as hope: one merely hopes that something is true while at the same time recognizing that it could be false.

It is worth pausing to clarify the paper's twofold aims. The primary aim is to specify and defend an epistemic argument for aspirational theism—that is, an argument that identifies a defeasible reason to adopt rational hope that theism is true for those who highly value substantial epistemic goods, for whom God is a genuine epistemic possibility, and who rightly believe that God, if He existed, would be a substantial source of epistemic goods. The secondary aim is to explore related arguments—either for hoping that God exists or that God does not exist—in order to assess how aspirational theism broadly stacks up against aspirational atheism (and related views) within the axiology of theism. Accordingly, although the paper examines several arguments on both sides, this is done to situate the epistemic argument within the broader axiology-of-theism literature that has emerged in recent years.

Here is the layout of the paper. In the next section, we explore the nature of rational hope and the distinction between metaphysical and epistemic possibilities. We then sketch the epistemic argument for aspirational theism and examine the value of epistemic goods such as knowledge and true belief. Finally, we canvas epistemic reasons for aspirational atheism, find them wanting, and end by defending the epistemic argument for aspirational theism and replying to an objection from skeptical theism.

2. Preliminaries

The axiology of theism literature can be broadly divided into two camps: one holds that the existence of God would make the world objectively worse (anti-theism), while the other holds that His existence would make the world objectively better (pro-theism). A further distinction is between *impersonal* pro-theism and anti-

¹ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* IX (at the beginning).

theism, and *personal* pro-theism and anti-theism. The former turns on whether the (non-)existence of God would make the world objectively good or bad overall, while the latter hinges on whether His existence would be objectively good or bad for some or many individuals. In the subsections that follow, we lay the groundwork for the epistemic argument for aspirational theism.

2.1. *Aspirational Theism and Pro-Theism*

These distinctions can be applied to aspirational theism and aspirational atheism: the degree to which God's existence would objectively make the world better or worse—either overall or for some or all individuals—provides (some) basis for hoping, or not hoping, that God exists. The epistemic argument concludes that we should hope that God exists since He would be an overall epistemic good *for most finite epistemic agents*—a form of wide, personal aspirational theism. On this view, the existence of God would make the lives of most, if not all, people epistemically better overall, and for that reason, most epistemic agents have a strong reason to hope that God exists.

The difference between pro-theism and aspirational theism is that the former concerns the objective value of theistic worlds, while the latter holds that we can rationally—and should—hope that we inhabit a theistic world. To see why, we first review the nature of rational hope and address a metaphysical objection to the axiology of theism. We then turn to the value of epistemic goods and sketch an argument for aspirational theism.

2.2. *The Nature of Rational Hope*

On several standard theories of rational hope, it consists of a few components: an agent, *S*, can rationally hope that *p* only if *p* is a real epistemic possibility for *S*—nothing *S* knows rules *p* out—and *S* strongly desires that *p* (Martin 2014; Meirav 2009). One can rationally hope about the past only if one's hope concerns a genuine epistemic possibility about the past; for example, Mary cannot rationally hope that John did not cheat if she knows that he did, but she can if she merely suspects that he cheated. These constraints bear directly on the question of hoping that God exists. Rational hope here assumes that theism is a live epistemic possibility. Accordingly, the argument in this paper applies only to individuals for whom theism is epistemically live, and not to those for whom it is epistemically dead—where one has knowledge that God exists or that He does not. A central caveat of

the epistemic argument, then, is that it can rationally appeal only to those for whom God's existence remains a genuine epistemic possibility.

However, such accounts of rational hope face *the despair objection*: if rational hope that *F* is only the combination of the (epistemic) possibility that *F* and the fact that an agent, *S*, desires *F*, then hope, so understood, would be indistinguishable from despair. As the Red quote from *The Shawshank Redemption* at the start of the paper illustrates, one may desire that *F* and recognize it as an epistemic possibility yet still despair because the event seems overwhelmingly unlikely. Something more, then, must be added to distinguish rational hope from despair. Drawing on Dan Speak (2024), this paper defines rational hope as:

If agent *S* (a) rightly believes that *p* is a real epistemic possibility for her, (b) *p* would be desirable (or have desirable ends) for *S*, and (c) *S* is properly motivating in the right contexts by *p*, then *S* rationally hopes that *p*.

The (a) and (b) aspects of our account of rational hope mirror those found in standard accounts, so it is really condition (c) that distinguishes our view from many others. What does it mean for a hope to *be properly motivating in the right contexts*? The first part is that such hope cannot be grounded in distortive forms of practical or epistemic engagement. For example, it cannot count as rational hope if it is based purely on self-deception or motivated reasoning. A rational hope is properly motivating only if it is not sustained by suppressed counterevidence, overly inflated credence, or insulation from counterevidence. Someone has a rational hope only if it remains appropriately responsive and open to evidence that could show the hope is not based on a real epistemic possibility. Thus, someone who hopes that God exists while ignoring evidence that God cannot exist—perhaps a cogent version of the problem of evil—lacks *rational* hope.

There is another component of our account of rational hope, namely that *it is properly motivating*. The idea is that, in the right contexts, a rational hope motivates agents in characteristic ways. For example, if Bob has a rational hope that his son survived the war despite the lack of communication—since it is a genuine epistemic possibility for him—Bob will be motivated to watch for a visitor with news of his son, a letter in the mail, to actively seek out evidence of his son's status, and so forth. In the appropriate contexts, Bob is animated by his hope to remain open to such evidence. To give another example, closer to the theme of this paper, a philosopher of religion who regards theism as epistemically open, given the difficulty of establishing highly contentious metaphysical views, may nonetheless hope that God exists. Her rational hope manifests, in part, as openness to religious

experiences, a willingness to engage with theistic traditions, and openness to the possibility of meeting God in the afterlife, even while remaining open to atheistic counterevidence and willing to revise her views accordingly.

A contrast case would be someone who claims to “hope” that God exists but refuses to read atheistic arguments, dismisses disagreements with highly intelligent atheistic philosophers as mere exercises in bad faith, and treats doubt as a failure. This is not an example of rational hope. Such an attitude is motivated in an epistemically distorting and biased way, drawing on cognitive tendencies like motivated reasoning and self-deception. Before proceeding further, we must address a potential objection from the metaphysics of traditional theism.

2.3. *A Metaphysical Objection*

Someone may object that axiological comparisons between theistic and atheistic worlds must presuppose possible worlds to ground those comparisons, even though God either exists or does not exist necessarily. Because of God’s necessary (non-)existence, there is no nearest possible world in which the truth value of the proposition “God exists” differs from that of the actual world (Mugg 2016; Kraay and Dragos 2013,160).

This objection can be dispatched by treating theism and atheism as live epistemic possibilities—the minimum required for rational hope. We can just as readily assess rational preferences and hopes by comparing live epistemic possibilities rather than metaphysical ones. Many philosophers accept that one can rationally hope about events in the past that are epistemically opaque matter (Martin 2013,68). For example, Sam can rationally hope that he passed the exam even though he took it the day before. If rational hopes about past matters of fact can be grounded in live epistemic possibilities, the same holds for those who hope that God exists and genuinely regard His existence as a live epistemic possibility.

Why think that theism is a genuine epistemic possibility *for many epistemic agents*? Simple. The evidence for both theism and atheism is deeply contested, with persistent disagreement among philosophical experts. For many agents, this offers good reason—after finding arguments from both sides less than decisive—to conclude that the issue remains epistemically open for them. The existence of sophisticated arguments and evidence offered by the most capable defenders on each side functions as second-order evidence that the metaphysical question is, for them, unsettled and contentious. For others, theism may not be a genuine epistemic possibility—perhaps they possess knowledge, unbeknownst to most, that decisively settles the matter one way or the other. The epistemic argument for

aspirational theism is not directed at such agents, but rather at those for whom the evidence is insufficient to warrant belief either for or against theism (Licon 2019).

3. Epistemic Value and the Epistemic Argument

This section reviews the distinction between the intrinsic and instrumental value of knowledge, and explains why, as epistemic agents, we are better off avoiding junk knowledge and beliefs, as a prelude to sketching the epistemic argument.

3.1. Instrumental Epistemic Value

Epistemic goods, such as knowledge and true belief, can be highly valuable. Some epistemologists hold that epistemic goods have both intrinsic and instrumental value (Kvanvig 2009; Madison 2017), while others hold that they have only instrumental value (Stapleford 2016; Carruthers 1992). The details of this debate are not crucial here, since the epistemic argument relies only on the general claim that some epistemic goods, like knowledge and true belief, have value of some kind—whether intrinsic or instrumental.

The instrumental value of knowledge and true belief should be qualified: we do not value trivial and useless knowledge and true beliefs—those that are neither directly nor indirectly valuable. For example, we typically do not care how many grains of sand remain in our socks after returning from the beach, how many jellybeans have been eaten globally in the last ten years, or whether there is an odd or even number of stars. Some people may value such facts for particular purposes, but the point is that many items of knowledge and true belief are not valuable to many people, and what counts as instrumentally valuable epistemic goods varies across individuals. There are countless details about the world that lack instrumental value for us. We would attend to them only if they became salient to our purposes—for instance, if someone asked whether they were losing their hair. The lesson, then, is that although we could know many things, we typically do not learn them because they lack value.

3.2. Epistemic Junk and Limited Resources

Many philosophers rightly hold that we should avoid acquiring junk epistemic goods in order to reduce cognitive clutter and conserve cognitive resources (Friedman 2018; Wedgwood 2012; Michaelian 2011; Harman 1986). The main reason for this epistemic exclusion is clear: acquiring and storing useless or trivial

epistemic goods wastes time, effort, and resources. Cognitive and personal resources are limited—we have only so much time, energy, and cognitive capacity to navigate the world and pursue our projects. Acquiring trivial epistemic goods needlessly expends those resources. It is not always clear which epistemic goods are useless or trivial, and determining how our interests relate to epistemic goods is often complex. Still, when we know that an epistemic good is useless or trivial, we have practical reason to forgo it.

In addition, acquiring useless and trivial true beliefs and knowledge carries opportunity costs: the time and effort spent acquiring them could instead be devoted to acquiring substantive and useful epistemic goods. Because we lack the ability to perfectly filter trivial epistemic goods from substantive ones, we often must acquire some of the former in order to obtain the latter. The ideal, of course, would be to acquire only useful and substantive knowledge and true belief. This is where God—the best source of useful and substantive epistemic goods for which one could hope—enters the picture.

3.3. The Epistemic Argument

The distinction between valuable and junk epistemic goods informs the epistemic argument: if God exists, He would be the best source of substantial epistemic goods and could distinguish between substantive and junk epistemic goods for particular agents. These considerations form the backbone of the epistemic argument, which can be formulated as follows:

1. There are many epistemic agents, S^* , who:
 - (i) rightly believes both that theism is a real epistemic possibility for them and, if He existed, the God (of theism) would be a source of substantial epistemic goods;
 - (ii) desire a source of substantial epistemic goods; and,
 - (iii) would be properly motivated in the right context by access to those epistemic goods.
2. There could be no better source of substantial epistemic goods than the theistic God.

THEREFORE:

3. For epistemic agents, S^* , they have a *defeasible* reason to hope that (the theistic) God exists (i.e., to adopt aspirational theism) [from premises 1 (i, ii, iii) and 2].

Call this *the epistemic argument*.

We should pause here to unpack (2). The premise is comprised of two aspects, each of which we will defend later in the paper. The first component is:

LOCATION: Because what counts as useful and valuable epistemic goods varies (somewhat) across agents, if God exists, He is best situated given His omniscience, to know which epistemic goods would be valuable and useful to each individual (and which would not).

The second is:

FITTINGNESS: If God exists, then either God will give us (valuable, useful) epistemic goods, or He will withhold them because they aren't actually beneficial for us².

Here we simply lay out the argument, leaving a fuller defense for section 4. In the meantime, why care about this argument? There are at least two reasons. First, aspirational theism and aspirational atheism are attitudes grounded in rational hope and are thus distinct from pro-theism and anti-theism: the latter concern the objective value of theistic and atheistic worlds, whereas the former concern the rational mental attitudes we should adopt toward questions in the axiology of theism. Second, the use of epistemic considerations to advance positions in the axiology of theism remains in its early stages. Although the literature is burgeoning, there are still relatively few arguments that appeal to epistemic reasons in support of pro-theism, anti-theism, or related views such as aspirational theism. Before turning to broader arguments in the axiology-of-theism space—centered on epistemic reasons for both aspirational theism and atheism—we first consider a preliminary objection to the idea of God as a source of substantial epistemic goods.

² The idea and wording for this condition came from an insightful, anonymous referee.

3.4. *The Objection from Pessimistic Meta-Induction*

A referee pressed the following objection: there seems to be good evidence that even if God exists, He is not a good source of epistemic goods, given the apparent historical lack of such goods in religious traditions. We appear to have strong reason to think that useful and substantial knowledge does not come from religious texts or traditions that even believers take to be divinely relevant. This is because, among other reasons, these texts are often taken to be literally false (as serious believers will admit) and thus largely uninformative about the world and human nature. If so, these texts are likely the best source of substantive knowledge we could reasonably expect from God, which casts doubt on the claim that God, if He exists, would be a source of substantial epistemic goods. Call this *the objection from pessimistic meta-induction*.

What should we make of this objection? It has several major weaknesses, as I see it. First, the epistemic norms governing rational hope differ from those governing belief. It is widely held among epistemologists that the degree of belief should (typically) track the strength of one's evidence. Hope, by contrast, can persist wherever there is room for doubt: one can hope that something exists, for example, provided one does not know that it does not exist. Bob can rationally hope that his son is still alive partly because he does not know that his son was killed in the war. The rational basis for such hope can be defeated by knowledge that shows the underlying epistemic possibility to be false—say, an official letter from the military informing Bob that his son's body was found and that he was killed in action. In the absence of definitive knowledge, however, hope is not defeated merely by strong but non-decisive evidence for or against a view (Licon 2021).

Second, there are at least two pieces of evidence that, while indecisive, suggest that God designed the world to be conducive to substantive epistemic goods rather than junk knowledge. First, there is solid evidence that the universe is fine-tuned for scientific discovery: had the physical constants been even slightly different—by orders of magnitude—the world would be far harder to understand through scientific inquiry. This suggests that the universe could have been arranged so as to generate far more junk knowledge for agents engaged in scientific investigation yet instead appears structured to increase the ratio of substantial-to-trivial scientific knowledge (Collins 2018). Second, there is a remarkable degree of cross-cultural agreement about core moral values—such as fairness, equality, and freedom (Sauer 2019)—as well as convergence on what matters most in life, including the value of relationships and love, reported by diverse individuals who have had near-death experiences (Moody 1975). Am I claiming that this evidence is decisive? Not at all.

Still, it does push back against the underlying assumption of the objection—namely, that there is no evidence that God, either directly or indirectly, would want us to possess substantive epistemic goods.

Third, skeptical theism holds, roughly, that God has justifying reasons for His actions and omissions that are beyond our ken (Hendricks 2023). This means that arguing—from the apparent lack of such goods in the world—that God, even if He exists, is not a good source of substantial epistemic goods presupposes that we would be in a position to know that God is not, or would not be, such a source. But that presupposes a deeper and more contentious claim: that we would be able to discern God’s epistemic aims and reasons even though they may plausibly lie beyond our epistemic reach. Put simply, it may be both true that God is a substantial source of epistemic goods—as we would expect if He exists, given His loving and maximal nature—and false that we would know where, how, or when to access those goods. They may exist without our realizing it, or they may be forthcoming even if they are not readily available at present. This latter point—concerning God as a source of substantive epistemic knowledge—is explored further in section 4.

Finally, as discussed in section (2.3), aspirational theism (or atheism) is attractive for many epistemic agents precisely because they find the evidence for either view too indecisive or inconclusive to justify belief. The evidence is not strong enough in either direction to warrant belief, but it can still support weaker mental attitudes such as hope. For these agents, the very indecisiveness of the evidence is what makes hope—rather than belief—the appropriate attitude. And insofar as theism remains a genuine epistemic possibility for them, there is room for aspirational argument both for and against theism. For these reasons, the objection from pessimistic meta-induction fails.

In the next section, we compare reasons for aspirational atheism and aspirational theism, and conclude that the case for aspirational atheism, based on the reasons we canvas, is weaker than the case for aspirational theism.

4. Aspirational Atheism and Aspirational Theism

There are several arguments for pro-theism and anti-theism that can be recast as arguments for aspirational theism and aspirational atheism. Here, we examine a couple of anti-theistic arguments as arguments for aspirational atheism: if some epistemic aspects of atheistic worlds are objectively better than those of theistic worlds, then that provides some reason to hope that God does not exist. The same structure applies to aspirational theism: if there is reason to think that at least some

aspects of theistic universes are objectively better than atheistic ones, then agents for whom theism is a genuine epistemic possibility have defeasible reason to hope that God exists.

In the next subsections, we evaluate these arguments, highlighting their limits as reasons for aspirational atheism. We then expand on reasons supporting the epistemic argument and conclude the section by examining an objection from skeptical theism.

4.1. The Privacy Argument for Aspirational Atheism

There is an epistemic argument for narrow personal anti-theism that rests on a plausible point: some individuals highly value total privacy, and such a desire would be thwarted in a theistic universe given God's omniscience. As a result, theistic universes are objectively worse, in this respect, for epistemic agents who value total (genuine) privacy than atheistic worlds (Kahane 2011,682–85; Kahane 2018). To clarify, consider the perfect voyeur: he can access every one of Sally's devices, records, and locations by untraceable means. However, he never shares what he discovers with others, exploits Sally with it, or even consumes it himself (Lougheed 2020,84–89). Even so, many people—likely Sally herself—would regard this as an unacceptable violation of privacy, despite the fact that the information is known by no one else.

Even with the noblest of intentions, we would not want others to read our emails, observe our intimate encounters, and so on without permission. Some individuals may value total privacy for good reasons: its absence can hamper creative outlets, alter how they interact with family, or leave them constantly on edge. Presumably, many of these reasons would apply, at least for some individuals, to God. As Christopher Hitchens similarly remarks:

Religion is a totalitarian belief [...]. It is the desire that there be an unalterable, unchallengeable, tyrannical authority who can convict you of thought crime while you are asleep, who can subject you to total surveillance around the clock every waking and sleeping minute of your life, before you're born and, even worse and where the real fun begins, after you're dead. A celestial North Korea. Who wants this to be true?³.

³ From a Munk Debate with Tony Blair (November 2010).

The epistemic argument for aspirational atheism holds that God's existence would preclude total and genuine privacy, since God knows everything. For those who highly value total privacy, this provides a strong reason to hope that God does not exist. Granting, for the sake of argument, that privacy is highly valuable for some individuals, it follows that such agents have a robust—though not necessarily decisive—reason to hope that God does not exist.

While the privacy argument initially appears to provide a robust reason to adopt aspirational atheism for those who highly prize total and genuine privacy, it rests on a dubious assumption about God: namely, that God has the ability to know everything about every individual and lacks strong moral or normative reasons to forgo that knowledge and *He exercises that ability*. This assumption underlies Lougheed's privacy argument for personal anti-theism. Here is the first—and key—premise (from Lougheed's argument):

(1*) If God exists, then God violates the privacy of all humans (Lougheed 2020, 76)

Premise (1*) is motivated by the claim that *if* God exists, He knows everything about everybody and total privacy is impossible. At first, this looks compelling. However, the traditional theistic God is also perfectly good and just, and responsive to moral and normative reasons. Given that, for some individuals, privacy is among their highest values, God may take a deep desire for total privacy as a reason to forgo complete knowledge of such individuals. The idea that God may have robust moral or normative reasons to forgo certain knowledge is not novel. Duncan Pritchard, in defending a novel resolution to the apparent conflict between freedom and divine omniscience, argues:

God could coherently limit his knowledge of the future such as to allow us to have free will, so that while he would presumably know enough about his subjects to have a fair idea of what we are likely to do next, he doesn't know what we will do next (at least once one focusses on any substantive distance in the future). As we noted earlier, this would be a self-imposed limitation in God's knowledge of the future that is rooted in his own goodness. As a self-imposed limitation, it would not reveal any inherent cognitive weakness on God's part, as the knowledge would be available to him were he to choose to possess it. (Pritchard 2021, 9)

Pritchard argues that God's self-imposed ignorance of the future may rest on moral reasons: preserving His creatures' freedom to choose between good and evil. Bracketing whatever one thinks about the divine foreknowledge problem and its

resolution, Pritchard's proposal is at least plausible. The same reasoning applies to privacy: God may recognize that complete privacy has great objective value for some individuals. To the extent that privacy has moral (or perhaps normative) value, God may therefore choose to forgo knowledge of certain individuals in order to preserve their deep privacy. To those who object that a *self-imposed limitation* is not reassuring, it is worth emphasizing that if God forgoes knowledge to uphold privacy for robust moral or normative reasons, He would not reverse that policy without similarly strong reasons, given His perfectly just and loving nature. Thus, it is not clear—merely by appealing to God's nature—that premise (1*) holds. There is a real possibility that God exists but does not infringe upon "the privacy of all humans" for strong moral or normative reasons (Lougheed 2020, 76).

Moreover, total privacy has a cost: one forgoes a highly valuable good—the unconditional love and acceptance of a perfectly good and loving God. God's love, given His perfect knowledge, would deeply affirm our individuality: He knows everything about us and loves us anyway. It is worth emphasizing that without such complete knowledge, God's love would be less reassuring. Even many who value privacy still want to be deeply loved for who they are by family, romantic partners, friends, and perhaps even God.

4.2. *The Complete Understanding Argument for Aspirational Atheism*

Some philosophers argue that a complete understanding of theistic worlds would be impossible because we cannot fully understand God, who is fundamental to the creation of the universe. If we cannot understand God, there is good reason to suppose that we cannot fully understand the universe either. This argument—often called *the complete understanding argument*—defended by Kirk Lougheed (2020, 156–57), holds that complete understanding would be unattainable in a theistic world. And since it is plausible that inhabiting a universe in which complete understanding is possible is better than one in which it is not, this provides a reason to hope that God does not exist. God is a maximal being whose nature and reasons we cannot fully comprehend. As such, God could influence or intervene in the world for reasons beyond our ken, making complete understanding impossible in principle. By contrast, while atheistic universes may also be difficult to understand, they would not contain a supreme agent capable of manipulating the world in ways that we could not, even in principle, fully understand (Di Ceglie 2022; Lougheed 2022).

Though this argument is initially plausible, it is flawed. We should expect that finite epistemic agents in atheistic worlds would arise through evolution, since on naturalism evolution is likely the only available explanation of how such agents came to exist (Plantinga manuscript). Yet there is no reason to think that evolution would favor agents capable of completely understanding the world (McKay and Dennett 2009). The anti-theist (or aspirational atheist) might reply that this does not show that complete understanding would be impossible *in principle* in atheistic worlds. However, that reply is far less compelling when applied to epistemic agents like us, given the epistemic constraints we are likely to face. And even if complete understanding is impossible in a theistic universe, there is little reason to think it would be achievable in an atheistic one either.

4.3. *The Epistemic Case for Aspirational Theism*

There are solid epistemic reasons to avoid acquiring and storing useless and trivial epistemic goods, and doing so may even count as an epistemic virtue. As we concluded earlier, our limited resources—cognitive and otherwise—are better spent acquiring knowledge and true belief that are, at a minimum, instrumentally valuable to agents like us. Accordingly, we should rationally want a source of substantive knowledge that screens out useless and trivial epistemic goods, except where those goods are necessary for indirectly understanding valuable and substantive knowledge.

Moreover, God would be uniquely well positioned, given His omniscience and benevolence, to filter instrumentally valuable epistemic goods from useless or trivial ones in a way tailored to the needs and aims of particular agents. Even when agents themselves might not recognize which epistemic goods are substantive, God would know, and we could trust Him to convey such goods when they are sufficiently valuable to agents with limited epistemic resources. The point is not merely that God possesses epistemic goods of generic value, but that He could selectively provide goods that are valuable to particular individuals, while withholding those that, though valuable to others, would not be valuable to them.

Consider that God would be the best source of substantial knowledge for which one could hope. Since God is perfectly loving and knows everything about us, we should expect Him to be the best source of substantive knowledge where our interests are concerned. God, if He exists, would be best positioned to deliver valuable epistemic goods to agents who would benefit from them both

instrumentally and spiritually⁴. Moreover, God could convey such goods at times and in contexts where they would have the greatest practical and instrumental value.

Here the question of timing arises⁵: there are times when God could convey useful and valuable epistemic goods to us as finite epistemic agents. The question, then, is when God would deliver such goods if He exists. The epistemic argument is neutral on when and where God might be expected to convey valuable epistemic goods, tailored to individuals. God could provide such goods here and now, or later—perhaps in the afterlife. The latter possibility flows from the beatific vision, that is, communing with God face-to-face in heaven. As epistemologist Elizabeth Jackson argues:

This [beatific vision] is commonly understood to have an intellectual component, where one gains new beliefs, knowledge, or understanding about God, themselves, and the world in an indescribably rich and glorious way [...]. Further, on many theological traditions, those in heaven have direct access to God. They can ask God any question, about any topic that they want. Not only is this objectively epistemically valuable on almost any theory of epistemic value—one has access to unlimited true beliefs, knowledge, accurate credences, understanding, and the like—but it is also an epistemic good that is likely to be desirable to many. Thus, it is also valuable if epistemic norms are instrumental, derived from the one's epistemic goals. One can learn any piece of information by simply asking God about it. (2024, 433–34)

On the latter possibility—where God answers the most pressing questions of heavenly residents—we would need to hope not only that God exists, but also that a heavenly residence awaits us after death. The epistemic argument, as it stands, is compatible with the beatific vision. However, for one to rationally hope both that God exists and that one will be a heavenly resident, these hopes must be grounded in live epistemic possibilities. As noted earlier, the scope of what we can rationally hope for is dictated by what remains epistemically live.

⁴ There are individuals who sincerely seek God yet remain ignorant of His existence. This striking omission underlies the argument from divine hiddenness: given God's nature, we should expect that sincere seekers would come to know that He exists—if He exists—since belief in God is presumably required for a relationship with Him. It would be odd, for example, to claim to love one's spouse while being unsure whether she exists. And yet, there are sincere seekers who have not found evidence robust enough to justify belief that God exists (Schellenberg 1993; Howard-Snyder & Moser 2001).

⁵ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this point. It strengthened the epistemic argument.

No doubt, if God exists, He would be best positioned to identify epistemic goods of substantial value to individual agents, including goods of vital moral importance and those relevant to living a fulfilling life. We should expect God to have perfect knowledge of moral facts and of how creatures like us can flourish, in ways tailored to individuals. Since there are plausibly better and worse kinds of lives for beings like us, and God would be epistemically best placed to recognize this, we should also expect Him not only to know the nature of human flourishing but to convey the relevant epistemic goods through avenues such as divine revelation and religious experience.

God is the best source of significant knowledge and truths for which we could hope. Even though we already have many substantive epistemic sources—such as history books, testimony, and the like—those sources still deliver a mix of useful and useless epistemic goods. While God is hardly the only source of substantive epistemic goods, He is the only source we should expect to provide epistemic goods that are *solely substantive, filtering out what would not be of value to us as finite knowers, given His maximal knowledge, justice, and love*. So, as finite epistemic agents with limited cognitive resources, we have epistemic reason to hope that God exists.

4.4. Aspirational Theism and Skeptical Theism

Here we should pause to address an objection from skeptical theism—roughly, the view that our knowledge of goods and evils fails to exhaust the actual universe of goods and evils. Such radically incomplete knowledge undercuts arguments from evil that appeal to our assessments of suffering to claim that there are instances lacking compensating goods and thus constituting evidence against God's existence. According to skeptical theism, given our limited grasp of the full range of goods and evils, we are not epistemically entitled to make such judgments (Bergmann 2009).

As Hendricks (2020) argues, skeptical theism, if true, has implications for certain positions in the axiology of theism, especially versions of anti-theism. Such views rely on our vastly incomplete knowledge of the universe of goods and evils and, in doing so, neglect the possibility that there are relevant goods and evils in the normative order that lie beyond our epistemic access—as arguably occurs in the evidential problem of evil. The question, then, is whether skeptical theism has similar implications for the epistemic argument for aspirational theism.

Here it is the second premise of the epistemic argument restated:

- (2) There could be no better source of substantial epistemic goods than God.

As a reminder, premise (2) has two components: *LOCATION* (since what is epistemically good and useful varies somewhat across agents, and God is best placed to know those factors) and *FITTINGNESS* (God will either give us valuable and useful knowledge or withhold it because it is not actually good for us).

Does skeptical theism undercut or weaken either component? *LOCATION* appears largely immune, since it follows from God's nature: given His omniscience, God would know which epistemic goods are valuable to each individual, not only in virtue of their being epistemic agents, but also in light of what they value and aim at—bracketing cases in which agents value privacy such that God would forgo otherwise private knowledge of them.

The second aspect of premise (2), *FITTINGNESS*, may be more vulnerable to skeptical theism. God might otherwise convey valuable and useful knowledge, tailored to individuals, to assist finite epistemic agents like us in the pursuit of our aims and projects. However, it may be that doing so would result in evils without sufficient compensating goods—goods of which we are unaware, given our limited grasp of the universe of goods and evils. Thus, even if God possesses valuable and useful epistemic goods relevant to our projects and aims, He may have good reasons, beyond our ken, to withhold at least some of them.

This is not in fact an objection to the epistemic argument. God would convey epistemic goods—such as substantial knowledge—tailored to specific epistemic agents *unless He has good moral or normative reason not to*. That qualification is implied by God's perfectly just and loving nature: He would not deliver epistemic goods if doing so would be harmful, just as He would permit suffering only if it were necessary to secure a greater good or prevent a greater evil (Howard-Snyder & Howard-Snyder 1999,117). If God has reasons beyond our ken to withhold certain pieces of knowledge, this would benefit the relevant epistemic agents as *FITTINGNESS* requires.

This is exactly what we should want from the best source of substantial knowledge; we do not—and should not—want harmful or wasteful epistemic goods. The possibility that God may have good moral or normative reasons to withhold certain epistemic goods from particular (or even all) agents is itself a reason to hope that God exists, as He would thereby be the best source of substantial knowledge for which one could hope. Thus, if skeptical theism is true, it merely reinforces why God would be the ideal epistemic source. And since most of us want the best source of substantial knowledge, most of us have a robust reason to adopt aspirational theism.

5. Conclusion

In closing, the epistemic argument for aspirational theism offers a modest but non-trivial reason to hope that God exists, grounded not in doxastic commitment but in epistemic value. For finite agents with limited cognitive resources, the prospect of a perfectly knowledgeable and morally good source of substantive epistemic goods provides a defeasible reason for rational hope, so long as theism remains a live epistemic possibility. Importantly, this argument does not presuppose that God would immediately or transparently supply such goods, nor does it collapse hope into belief. Rather, it situates aspirational theism within the broader axiology of theism as a stance responsive to epistemic limits, value, and fittingness. Even when objections from privacy, hiddenness, or skeptical theism are taken seriously, the case for aspirational theism remains intact, and, for many epistemic agents, rationally attractive.

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