

Becoming Perfect and Other Axiological Advantages of Theism

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Abstract: The axiology of theism focuses on whether living in a theistic or non-theistic reality is best for worlds or the lives of persons. Some argue that supernatural-atheism—the view that God does not exist, but things like karma or souls do—is best because, on that view, worlds or persons could possess all the goods of theism without its disadvantages. However, I argue that certain forms of theism offer persons several *unique* goods: namely, partaking in the divine nature, becoming perfected, having an intimate mutual relationship with Perfection, and knowing that one has been perfected. I further argue that many of the allegedly unique goods of anti-theism are either available on theism or that anti-theism has the same disadvantages as theism concerning those goods. Pro-theism is thus a stronger position than is currently assessed in the axiology of theism literature.

Keywords: Axiology of theism, Pro-theism, Anti-theism, Value, God

Introduction

The axiology of theism addresses “questions about the axiological consequences of theism relative to some non-theistic world” (Lougheed 2022c, 2). It asks whether God’s existence or activities—meaning the existence or activities of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, and perfect being—makes any difference to the value of the world or to the lives of persons. This difference, moreover, can be considered just for a specific issue (like privacy) or overall. In the literature, the two most prominent answers to such axiological questions are *pro-theism*, the view that God’s existence or activities make (or would make) a positive difference in value to the world or to persons, and *anti-theism*, the view that God’s existence or activities make

(or would make) a negative difference in value to the world or to persons.¹ Or, to put the latter view in different terms, it is *pro-atheistic*, given that it views God's *non*-existence as being of positive value to the world or to persons. And pro-atheism can itself be considered in two ways: *naturalist-atheism*, which assesses the axiological value of a completely natural, material world with no god-like beings or forces in it (i.e., no souls, karma, etc.), and *supernatural-atheism*, which rejects the existence of God, but allows for the existence of supernatural god-like entities or forces like karma.

In the first portion of this paper, I argue that proponents of anti-theism have failed to consider certain unique goods that theism offers to human persons—unique against both naturalist-atheism and supernatural-atheism. I then argue that, in many cases, the alleged axiological advantages that anti-theism possesses over pro-theism are largely illusory. This is because anti-theism either suffers from the same axiological drawbacks as theism does or because goods that exist in atheistic worlds can largely be had in theistic ones. Given this, I conclude that since theism offers human beings unique goods, while also possessing all (or nearly all) the goods that atheistic worlds do, then pro-theism is axiologically better than anti-theism; or, at the very least, any axiological conclusion favoring anti-theism is highly debatable.

Before proceeding further, two preliminaries are in order. First, while I acknowledge that the axiology of theism—which is generally concerned with comparative judgements—raises concerns about counterpossibles and thus about the legitimacy of the axiological question itself, I leave that discussion aside for this paper, as I believe it has been adequately addressed elsewhere.² Second, by theism, I mean something like traditional Christian theism, where God is an omni-being and offers human beings a unique type of afterlife that is similar to what has been central to forms of Christianity like Catholicism. I call this theism in the paper, rather than Catholicism or Christianity, for several reasons. First, there could be forms of theism that incorporate the Christian elements needed for my arguments to succeed without necessarily being considered Christian (e.g., they posit a Christian-like afterlife, but not a Trinity, etc.). Second, as is permissible in the axiological debate (more on this below), I sometimes deviate from orthodox Catholic or Christian doctrines, which offers further reason to maintain the theism label over Christianity

¹ Other positions include: 1) *neutralism*, the view that God's existence or activities are neutral (i.e., neither good nor bad) in terms of their value to the world; 2) *quietism*, the view that axiological questions about God are fundamentally unanswerable; and 3) *agnosticism*, the view that human beings currently cannot answer the aforementioned questions.

² For an explanation of counterpossibles and other issues concerning the axiology of theism, see Loughheed's (2020, 8–27) *The Axiological Status of Theism and Other Worldviews*.

or Catholicism. Finally, I contend that reason alone can demonstrate that the elements needed for my arguments to succeed are expected—even entailed—on mere theism, meaning that theism itself plausibly possesses the axiological advantages argued for below, not just Christianity or Catholicism. Consequently, while I use Christian and Catholic doctrines to illustrate certain points, I note—either directly or in footnotes—if those doctrines (or something similar to them) would likely exist given mere theism. That said, for those unsympathetic to my attempts to derive Christian and Catholic-like doctrines from mere theism, they can consider my use of the latter term as largely synonymous with Catholicism, meaning that the axiological advantages I argue for would be restricted to Catholic-like theisms.

Theism and Perfection

In the axiology of theism literature, various goods are advanced as reasons to favor pro-theism over anti-theism. These include (but are not limited to) the claim that theism secures cosmic justice, allows for a blissful afterlife, and ensures that gratuitous evil is avoided (i.e., God could ensure that no evil in the world was *genuinely* gratuitous).³ Kirk Loughheed (2020, 177–88), however, has argued that these reasons actually provide pro-theism with *no* axiological advantage over anti-theism, because all the aforementioned goods would be available in supernatural-atheistic worlds. Guy Kahane (2020) has argued something similar.

For instance, imagine a world with a *nearly*-omni entity. Such an entity would not be God as theism describes Him, but it could guarantee all the theistic goods noted above (cosmic justice, etc.)—or so Loughheed would argue. Thus, certain atheistic worlds would possess all the axiological benefits of theism, thereby making them better than theistic worlds, as such atheistic worlds would possess the goods of both atheism and theism, but without the alleged drawbacks of theistic worlds (such as a loss of complete privacy, etc.).

Tempering this idea, however, is the fact that Loughheed (2022a) has recently recognized that certain theistic goods likely could not exist in supernatural-atheistic worlds without also including the drawbacks of theism. For example, Loughheed (2022a, 352) suggests that cosmic justice could not occur without the existence of an all-knowing being, thus necessitating a loss of privacy (one of the alleged drawbacks of theism). If Loughheed is right, then the good of cosmic justice likely cannot co-exist with the good of privacy (more on this below).

³ See Kraay (2021, 40–8) and Loughheed (2022b).

However, even with the recognition that it may be more difficult than supposed for supernatural-atheism to axiologically overcome theism, arguments in favor of anti-theism—like those offered by Loughheed and Kahane—are worth countering more fully. And one way to do so is to posit goods that are *unique* to theism, of which there are several.

To see the first of them, consider another good routinely offered in favor of pro-theism: namely, having a freely-chosen relationship with God (Kraay 2021, 48). Loughheed (2020, 185) and others recognize this good, but Loughheed still argues that such a relationship—or something very similar to it—could be had on supernatural-atheism with a nearly-omni entity, thus negating the uniqueness of this particular theistic good. Moreover, to counter any objection the theist might make against this claim, Loughheed (2020, 185) notes that the onus is on the pro-theist to show why a relationship with God is unique or better than a relationship with a nearly-omni entity.

Now, Loughheed (2022a, 354) has recently re-evaluated this claim, noting that, in terms of a relationship with God, theism offers a relationship of perfect trust, which a supernatural god-like entity cannot. Loughheed, however, does not go far enough, as a relationship with God offers more than just a relationship of perfect trust.

To see why, consider that for versions of theism like Catholicism, a freely-chosen afterlife-based relationship with God is not merely some exceptional version of a human relationship, nor is the afterlife merely some superb earthly existence. Rather, the afterlife involves the beatific vision, where human beings—though remaining human and keeping their personal identities—have a direct intellectual (and possibly even physical) vision of the revealed divine essence. This vision so intimately unites such individuals to God that they *become like God* through this unity. People in this state become divinized, in the sense that they partake in the divine nature and come to know God as intimately as humanly possible (possibly even as closely as the various members of the Trinity know each other (more on this below)).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (§§1023-1028, emphasis added) explains this afterlife as follows:

Those who die in God's grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live for ever with Christ. *They are like God for ever*, for they "see him as he is," face to face. . . This perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity. . . is called "heaven." Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness . . . Heaven is the blessed community of all who are perfectly incorporated into Christ . . . Because of his transcendence, God cannot be seen as he

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is, unless he himself opens up his mystery to man's immediate contemplation and gives him the capacity for it. The Church calls this contemplation of God in his heavenly glory "the beatific vision"

And concerning the idea of partaking in the divine nature, the Catechism (§460, emphasis added) states:

The Word became flesh to make us "*partakers of the divine nature*" [2 Peter 1:4]: "For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God." "For the Son of God became man so that we might become God." "The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods."

Thus, for versions of theism that posit something like the beatific vision, the "afterlife" and a "relationship with God" entail much more than what these terms are normally taken to mean. They entail that individuals literally partake in the nature of God and that they do so in the most intimate way possible. In fact, this union is so intimate, that the individuals who freely choose it become divine in a certain sense (though again, they remain distinct human persons, both from each other and from God⁴).

But since God is perfect, then this intimate relationship means that, on theism, individuals partake in perfection itself. In essence, through union with God, individuals are perfected and are also joined to perfection, sharing it for eternity. This is an enormous good. Indeed, imagine being perfect—not just perfectly satisfied and content (which would undermine any objections that an afterlife would be boring), but perfect *in every way*, for eternity. That is arguably the greatest good that could be had. And it is here where appeals to supernatural-atheism fail, for

⁴ One might worry, however, how a human person could remain a distinct person if he partakes of the divine nature. In response, three points can be made. First, as there is no logical contradiction to this idea, the theist could argue that it is something that an omnipotent God could do, thereby making it legitimate to posit on the side of pro-theism. Second, the theist could claim that Jesus Christ—who is viewed as both fully God and fully man—is an example where a union of the human and divine already happened, meaning that uniting these two elements is possible while remaining a distinct person. And third, the theist could argue by analogy. For instance, during sexual intimacy, individuals are physically and psychologically overcome by this event, becoming wholly focused on it, yet they remain distinct persons precisely because they consciously *experience* it. In a similar way, directly and intimately experiencing the divine essence would overwhelm and perfect human persons, and make them wholly focused on that essence, but they would remain distinct persons because they would consciously experience it and would realize this fact.

there is an unbridgeable gap between absolute perfection and something less-than-perfect. It is a difference in kind, not just degree.

To see this, consider the following analogy. Imagine a man who has sinned (i.e., willfully and consciously done something immoral). Such a man is different in kind from a sinless/wholly innocent one, and regardless of how hard the man who has sinned tries, or how small his sin was, he can never become sinless again through his own power. And even though, if his sin was small, the man may be considered closer to a sinless state than other worse sinners, there is still an unbridgeable gulf between his current sinful state and his previous sinless one. Again, the difference is in kind, not just degree; for if it was an issue of degree, then the sinner could, at least in principle, become sinless again through his own power, yet he never can. This is the same for a perfect being versus an imperfect one; even if the imperfect entity only has a tiny imperfection, that entity can never be considered wholly perfect, and there is an impassable gulf between that entity's imperfection and complete perfection. Moreover, even if this entity could remedy its imperfection (using its omnipotence, for instance), such an entity could still never be considered perfect. This is because perfection—at least to my intuitions—requires always having been perfect and always remaining perfect. Thus, even if an imperfect entity could remedy its imperfection at some point, it would still have an irremovable flaw that ensured that it could never be considered perfect: namely, the permanent flaw of having been imperfect at some point in its existence. So, a perfect being, to be perfect, needs to never have not been perfect, a point which reinforces the claim that the gap between complete perfection and imperfection is unbridgeable.

Consider this issue from a different angle. Specifically, consider that if I conceived of a greatest conceivable being, and yet I conceived of a being who was at one point imperfect, but then made himself perfect, then I could conceive of an even greater being: namely, one that was always perfect, and had never been imperfect nor ever would be. Thus, all other things being equal, any being that was eternally perfect would be greater than one that was at some point imperfect—regardless of how small the imperfection was or for how short a time the imperfection existed. And if being the greatest is also a facet of perfection—which is highly plausible—then being the greatest conceivable being, and hence a perfect one, requires never having any imperfection. Thus, no imperfect entity can ever become perfect through its own power.

If the points above are correct, then theism (the view that a perfect being exists) is required for the good of being united to and partaking of perfection, as intimately partaking in the nature of one or more imperfect entities does not join one to

perfection, and never could, no matter how hard it is tried or how many imperfect entities are involved.

However, perhaps it could be objected that an entity who was not God, but who was still, say, omnipotent, could *make* human beings perfect, and so theism would be unnecessary for this particular good. Three responses, however, are available to this objection. First, Richard Swinburne (2016, 172–4) has argued that an omnipotent being just is God, in the sense that the other divine attributes—as Swinburne understands them—are entailed by and grounded in God’s omnipotence. Thus, positing an omnipotent being to make humans perfect is the same as positing God doing so; if Swinburne is correct, then theism would still be required for this particular good. Second, if the principle of proportionate causality is accepted—where whatever is in an effect must in some way be in the cause of the effect, for a cause cannot give what it does not have (Feser 2017, 14 & 32–3)—then it is at least questionable if an imperfect being, even an omnipotent one, could ever bestow perfection on another entity. And third, as argued above, it is extremely doubtful that anything could ever make itself perfect or be made perfect. Not only for the reasons noted earlier, but also because a perfect thing, to be perfect, needs to possess traits like necessary existence and aseity, which means always existing and not being dependent on anything else (for creation or otherwise).⁵ Thus, a created or caused-to-be perfect being is arguably a contradiction, as being uncreated and uncaused is an attribute of perfection. Consequently, no one previously imperfect can be made or be caused-to-be perfect (even if given god-like traits by an omnipotent being). And so, the only way that an imperfect entity or entities (like humans) could become perfect would be to so intimately *partake* in an already existent perfect nature that they become like that perfect nature. But this is precisely what certain forms of theism claim: that humans in heaven are “like God for ever” in a “perfect life” with the Trinity and are “perfectly incorporated into Christ” (Catechism, §§1023-1028). Moreover, humans in heaven receive “divine sonship” and share in God’s divinity (Catechism, §460). This particular good, therefore, is unique to theism—and not just to specific forms of it, but arguably to mere theism itself.⁶

⁵ Concerning aseity, Brian Leftow (1998) writes that “as perfect, God is self-sufficient.” And concerning necessary existence, he adds that “perfect-being theology yields divine necessity. To exist contingently is to be able not to exist. A being is more perfect if wholly immune to nonexistence.”

⁶ Indeed, the idea that God would want humans to be united to and partake of His perfect nature, and thus be perfected via that route, need not be something derived solely from revelation or religious doctrine. Arguments, for instance, could be made that an all-loving God would want as intimate of a relationship as possible with any of the creatures that wanted a relationship with Him, even to the point of uniting those creatures to His perfect nature and allowing them to partake of the latter. Furthermore, if unity to a perfect nature, and thus becoming perfect through such unity is a

Beyond the above good, theisms that posit the beatific vision not only entail that human beings will be perfected through their unity to a perfect being, but also that humans will be perfectly united to and partake in Perfection itself, which is God. Moreover, humans will not just be made good or gain knowledge, but will partake in Goodness, Knowledge, etc. itself, which, again, is God. Theism thus offers human persons the further good of a perfect mutual relationship with Perfection (and all that that entails, meaning a perfect relationship with Goodness, Knowledge, etc.). The relationship is mutual because God, being a person (or at least being person-like, meaning having a perfect intellect, will, and awareness), has a conscious and active loving relationship with perfected human persons, and those persons, who remain individuals even when united to God, actively and consciously reciprocate that relationship with their own perfect love. And since those persons will, as mentioned, remain individuals in this relationship, then they will *know* that they have been perfected and are in a relationship with Perfection. And such knowledge is not only a good,⁷ but is arguably a separate good from the two previous ones.⁸ Thus, theism offers four unique perfection-related goods unachievable on any form of anti-theism: the three noted above and the relationship of perfect trust that Loughheed already mentioned.

To counter the above claim, the anti-theist could argue that a perfect being need not be an omni-God, and so the above perfection-related goods are available on supernatural-atheism. This would be a Nagasawian strategy, as Yujin Nagasawa (2017, 90–4) has argued that a perfect being need not be an omni-being. Now, Nagasawa's strategy is disputed (Kvanvig 2018), but if someone did adopt this strategy as a way to claim that an eternal and perfect union with a perfect being could be had in a supernatural-atheistic world (i.e., a world with a non-omni God),

great good—as has been argued—then an omnibenevolent God would want His creatures to have that good at some point and so would give it to them. Of course, these arguments need further development, but they show that reason alone can make the case that theism entails an afterlife like the beatific vision.

⁷ To see why such knowledge would be a good, it is plausible that having additional knowledge is a good in and of itself. Moreover, consider this analogy: it is good to achieve 100% on an exam, but it is better to not only achieve this, but also to *know* that one has achieved it. Thus, all else being equal, it is better to be a being who has been perfected and knows that fact than to be a perfected being who does not know it. So, knowing that one has been perfected is a good.

⁸ One could, after all, posit a being who has been perfected, yet does not know that fact, thus making knowledge of that perfection a separate good. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that one could also argue that being perfected would necessarily include knowing that fact, thereby *not* making that knowledge a separate good. But whichever position is adopted, the fact that perfection-related goods include conscious knowledge of being perfected is a point that will be relevant shortly.

then the theist could simply argue that a perfect being just is God, so any world with a perfect being is a theistic world. Thus, unity with a perfect being *just is* unity with God. The argument then becomes merely semantic in nature, with one side claiming that a non-omni perfect being cannot be defined as God, and the other side claiming that it can. But such definitional arguments are largely uninteresting (and that is assuming that Nagasawa's strategy is even successful).

However, an objection related to Nagasawa's strategy might be to wonder whether a slightly imperfect god—call this “near-theism”—is close enough to perfection that it can still offer a good that is very near to what theism offers. Imagine, for instance, an omnipotent and omnibenevolent entity, but one who is not omniscient because he does not know some minor mathematical proposition that is completely unrelated to human flourishing. Assuming—against Nagasawa—that a perfect being must be an omni-being, then the above entity is not perfect. Yet such an entity, who could exist on supernatural-atheism, could offer humans something close to the beatific vision, and thus something close to what theism offers.⁹ But there are several problems with this approach.

First, the obvious point is that, since this entity is imperfect and therefore is not God, it cannot offer human beings the good that is the actual beatific vision, since the latter is a direct vision of the *divine* essence. Nor could it offer human beings unity with Perfection, and thus no chance at being perfected (as argued above). The chance of *knowing* that one has been perfected would also be lost, because no human would be perfected. Finally, humans could not have a mutual relationship with Perfection or Knowledge, as this entity is neither perfect nor has perfect knowledge. So, already, theism offers better goods than near-theism.¹⁰

Second, if this entity was as close to God as posited above, then a world with such an entity would have all the alleged drawbacks of theism but without the perfection-related goods noted above. But this means that theism would be overall better,

⁹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

¹⁰ Even a person's *experience* of a perfect God versus a near-perfect one would arguably be different. Consider: if perfection is different in kind from anything imperfect—as argued earlier—then the human experience of perfection would plausibly be different, just as (to use a banal example) the difference in kind between genuine maple syrup and its corn syrup imitators also generates an experiential difference between them. Additionally, since it is an experience of *absolute perfection* versus one of imperfection, the experiential difference between them could be significant. Finally, a person experiencing a near-perfect God would *know* that he is neither being perfecting nor in a union with Perfection, and this knowledge would plausibly affect his overall experience, making it inferior to experiencing a perfect God *and knowing* that he is doing so. Thus, even from an experiential perspective, there is an axiological difference that favors theism, with that difference being potentially significant.

because, all else being axiologically equal, receiving all the perfection-related goods above is better than not receiving them if the disadvantages of one's position are the same, as they are on theism and near-theism. And if, to counter theism's overall better rating, the anti-theist tries to increase near-theism's axiological standing by removing more of the power, ability, knowledge, etc. of this entity in order to mitigate the theistic-equivalent disadvantages of near-theism, then the entity moves further and further from perfection. But in that case, being united to such a far-from-perfect entity is a much lesser good than what theism offer, thereby undermining the idea that near-theism can offer almost exactly what theism can.

Third, the positing of an entity almost equivalent to God raises further questions. For instance, if this entity lacks, say, some small piece of knowledge, then can the entity acquire that piece of knowledge? If not, then the entity is not omnipotent either, which suddenly moves it further from perfection. Yet if the entity can acquire the piece of knowledge but has not done so, then that arguably shows a character deficiency in the entity—laziness, absentmindedness, etc.—which again moves it further from perfection. Thus, even a near-perfect entity might be further from perfection than initially supposed, as issues like these need to be addressed by anyone positing near-theism.¹¹

But perhaps Platonism can save the anti-theist, for maybe human beings could be intimately united to the Platonic form of Perfection, thereby bypassing the need for God. Yet there are also several problems with this idea.

First, how would an impersonal Platonic form *choose* to allow a person to partake of its nature, since making a choice implies personhood (or at least having an intellect, will, and self-awareness). And if the process is automatic or law-like, then

¹¹ An anonymous reviewer wonders about an entity almost equivalent to God who lacks some small piece of knowledge *because this lack is a brute fact*. Would this change anything? Arguably not, as the entity's inability to overcome this deficiency still seems to undermine its omnipotence and makes the entity less great or perfect than one whose knowledge and power are not reduced by brute facts. It also undermines the entity's aseity, thus further compounding its imperfections. Imagine, for instance, an entity whose otherwise omni-power and knowledge just happen to be reduced to the level of a human being due to brute facts. It would be absurd to view such an entity as God, or as a perfect/greatest possible being. Yet it is not merely the amount of knowledge or power that this entity lacks that makes it imperfect and unworthy of the God moniker, it is also the fact that the entity is reduced to this state by something outside itself and which it cannot control; something outside its nature that nevertheless influences that nature, and which it cannot change (i.e., brute facts). Thus, it is the very fact that the entity is affected by brute facts at all which renders it imperfect. And this would still be true even if a brute fact affected the entity only slightly. Brute facts, therefore, do little to prevent the worry that a near-perfect entity might be further from perfection than initially supposed.

the Platonic position would undermine the good of human choice to a greater extent than theism (more on this below).

Second, it is highly questionable if a *person* can be intimately united to and partake in the nature of an *impersonal* Platonic form, for they are two fundamentally different things, not just in degree but in kind. And even assuming this is possible, it is hard to see how a person would remain a person in such a union. After all, to intimately partake in the nature of an impersonal thing implies the adoption of that nature, meaning a loss of personhood and self-awareness. Moreover, if that which is perfect on Platonism is an impersonal thing—meaning that a lack of personhood is required for perfection—then it follows that to become perfect on Platonism is to become an impersonal thing. But if Platonism requires a loss of individual personhood (or any personhood at all) to be united to Perfection, whereas theism does not, and if maintaining one’s personhood is a good—which is highly plausible—then this is yet another reason to see theism as axiologically better than Platonism. In fact, as Sebastian Gäb (2024, 286–287) notes, a plausible case can be made that, for individual persons, it is questionable if an *impersonal* afterlife can even be considered an afterlife at all, for the loss of one’s individuality and personality in the afterlife is functionally equivalent to there being no afterlife whatsoever. So, if the Platonic “afterlife” is impersonal, then, on Platonism, the good of an afterlife is lost as well, at least practically speaking. Additionally, given the loss of one’s individuality, the goods of a relationship with Perfection and knowing that one has been perfected would also be lost on Platonism (and the same would be true for other views where a post-mortem loss of personhood occurs).

The third issue for Platonism is that it is highly plausible that a perfect thing must be personal.¹² Thus, Perfection would need to be something personal, not an impersonal Platonic form. And so, unlike theism, Platonism would not even be a viable option to acquire the aforementioned perfection-related goods. A corollary to this concern is that a perfect thing would plausibly need to be omnipotent, and if Swinburne (as above) is correct that omnipotence entails the other divine attributes, including personhood, then this is another problem for Platonism and the issue of perfection.

Fourth, if there are multiple *separate* Platonic forms that humans need to be intimately united to in order to share in perfection—like the forms of perfect Knowledge, perfect Power, etc.—then it seems implausible that humans could be

¹² Mawson (2019, 10) writes: “Are *persons* greater than internal combustion engines; sonatas; bathroom mirrors; or indeed anything else? ...it seems to me that this question yields the answer ‘Yes’, thus establishing that the greatest being possible will be a person. ... Perfect Being Theology then is reflection on what the best person possible would be like.”

intimately united to these various forms at the same time. For if a person is *wholly* subsumed in and partakes of one form, it seems difficult to see how he could also be *wholly* subsumed in and partake of a completely separate form. Furthermore, how do the various forms know to allow certain individuals to wholly partake of each of them, but not allow other people to do so, or stop other, unwanted forms—like the form of Injustice—from “attaching” themselves to people they should not be attached to. By contrast, God is Perfection, Knowledge, etc. all in one, so to be united to *one* God and to partake of His nature is to partake of all these things at the same time, which, at the very least, seems more plausible (and arguably simpler) than the aforementioned Platonic alternative.

Finally, fifth, even if humans could maintain their personhood in an intimate union with an impersonal Platonic form, such a union still does not provide human persons with a perfect *mutual* relationship with Perfection, because the impersonal Platonic form does not love the person back, as occurs on theism. The Platonic form just is. For all these reasons, appealing to Platonism does not aid the anti-theist concerning the perfection-related goods that theism offers, because Platonism either fails to provide some or all of these goods.

Ultimately, it is highly plausible that only theism offers all human beings the good of the opportunity to partake—and, for those in the afterlife, the good of actually partaking—in four perfection-related goods: 1) being perfected, and remaining perfect for eternity, by being intimately united to and participating in a perfect nature; 2) having a perfect *mutual* relationship with Perfection itself (which includes Knowledge itself, etc.); 3) *knowing* that one has been made perfect and is in a relationship with Perfection; and, 4) having a relationship of perfect trust.¹³

Atheistic Goods on Theism

Having argued that there are goods that are unique to theism, it is now worth countering some of the more prominent axiological advantages that anti-theism

¹³ But maybe certain persons do not personally value one or more of these goods. Kahane (2020, 105), for instance, finds the idea of having a relationship with a supreme being unappealing, and believes the same is true for many atheists. Perhaps, though one wonders if this relationship’s appeal would increase when conceived of as a relationship with Perfection itself. Nevertheless, Kahane’s view reinforces the point—already raised by Loughheed and which will be expanded on below—that certain goods can only be had if others exist. Consequently, if being perfected can only occur through a relationship with a personal being that is Perfection itself (as argued above), and if being perfected is a great good for human beings—as I think most people would recognize—then even people who dislike the idea of a relationship with Perfection may find that being perfected is worth enduring this alleged undesired relationship. Thus, pro-theism may still be best overall.

alleged holds over pro-theism. This will be done in two ways. First, I will argue that some alleged disadvantages of theism also exist on anti-theism, so both positions suffer equally (or close to equally) from those disadvantages. Second, I will argue that the alleged goods possessed by anti-theism can also be had (or at least largely had) on theism, thus negating any (significant) axiological advantage that anti-theism allegedly has over pro-theism.

Privacy

Several thinkers in the debate about the axiology of theism argue that the good of privacy is a strong point against theism. This is because, if one believes that people have a right to privacy and thus have the freedom to decide who knows what about them, then theism is problematic, as an omniscient God would unavoidably know everyone's every thought without their consent (although God would do so through no fault of His own given that omniscience is part of His nature). Thus, while some privacy is available on theism, the good of complete privacy is not.

The pro-theist, however, can address this privacy concern in several ways. First, even if it is accepted that privacy is a right¹⁴, it can be argued that it is only a right in relation to other human persons, not to humanity's creator; specifically, theism's unique creator-creature relationship creates a distinction that is relevant to the privacy debate. To see why, consider a similar issue: namely, a person's continued earthly existence, which on theism (or at least some versions of theism) is made possible by God actively keeping a person in that state. But while human beings have a right to earthly life in relation to other people—meaning that individuals should not be willfully killed by other people—that right does not extend to God, who can stop actively maintaining a person's earthly existence at His discretion (which is precisely what occurs on theism whenever a person physically dies). Nevertheless, God does not violate a person's right to earthly life when He ceases to maintain the person in earthly existence, because God's status as humanity's creator gives Him certain prerogatives that human beings do not have. And these prerogatives could plausibly extend to the issue of privacy.

Next, the pro-theist could argue that privacy is not a good in and of itself, but merely an instrumental good. It is only a good because of what it allows humans to achieve: specifically, the hiding of secrets which, if exposed, could create negative consequences for a person in some way (i.e., a person could be embarrassed,

¹⁴ And this need not be accepted. Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu (2022), for instance, argue that there is no moral right to privacy.

blackmailed, etc.). To support this idea, consider, for instance, that a moral and loving husband with nothing to hide from his wife—no negative thoughts or actions against her, etc.—neither needs *nor values* spousal privacy. Even if the wife discovered something about the husband before he had a chance to disclose it, or he was hiding it for some reason—like wanting to surprise the wife with a gift—this inadvertent discovery would not concern the husband, even though the information was ultimately acquired without his consent. By contrast, a *cheating* husband wants his wife to obtain consent before acquiring information about him that he has not yet divulged to her, and he values his privacy, but he does so because the husband fears the consequences of what would occur if the wife discovered information that he wanted to conceal. Privacy is also considered valuable not just because a person is worried about what might happen to them if a secret is divulged, but also because they may be worried that other people could suffer negative consequences due to a breach of privacy. For instance, if a secret is exposed, another person might lose their job, become embarrassed, become emotionally distressed, etc. Consequently, given such points, an argument could be made that privacy is only valuable because of the consequences it allows people to avoid.

Yet none of the above concerns apply to God. For instance, while God will be aware of all human thoughts on theism, He will not divulge them to anyone else (neither willingly nor by force). So, although human privacy is breached on theism, it is breached by someone who will maintain that privacy as well (or better¹⁵) than humans will. It is a risk-free breach of privacy that moves nowhere beyond God Himself, meaning a being who cannot be coerced, convinced, or made to violate that privacy. Moreover, given God's omnibenevolence, He will never use His breach of human privacy for evil and will always treat people fairly, acting towards their ultimate good no matter what secrets He knows about them. This also means that, even if, for the sake of argument, God does divulge a person's secrets for some reason, His doing so will always be to the person's ultimate benefit (and possibly to the ultimate benefit of others as well). Thus, unlike humans who might, and sometimes do, use a person's secrets to fundamentally harm them, God never would or could (given His omnibenevolence).

At the same time, any shame that people feel concerning their secrets is irrelevant to God, as God will not hold that shame against those who repent of their sinful thoughts and actions (and for those who do not repent, it is not their shame that damns them, but their actions, so the shame remains irrelevant in that case as well).

¹⁵ For instance, unlike humans, God will never get drunk and then divulge a secret that He otherwise would not have divulged.

Moreover, God is not affected by human secrets; He does not become emotionally distraught by them nor do they change His disposition or omnibenevolent nature.¹⁶ Thus, again, the pro-theist can plausibly argue that while privacy is something needed and valuable *when dealing with other human beings*, there is no need or value in it when dealing with God. Furthermore, since God's knowledge of human secrets is unbreachable and has no effect on how God will ultimately treat people, human privacy is *de facto* maintained as well as it would be on naturalist-atheism. Thus, while anti-theism may have some advantage over pro-theism concerning privacy, that advantage is negligible (or so the pro-theist can argue). This latter point is critical because, as Loughheed has argued in another context, goods can come in degrees, meaning that certain positions can vary in terms of the quantity and quality that they provide of a certain good. Making this claim is what allows Loughheed (2020, 35–6), for instance, to argue that most theistic goods can be had, either fully or close to fully, in a supernatural-atheistic world. But since, as argued above, anti-theism's privacy advantage over theism is minimal, then this same approach can be used to argue that theism offers almost all that anti-theism does concerning privacy.

Shifting strategies, the pro-theist can also argue that theism is at least as axiologically good of an option as any form of pro-atheism when privacy is weighed alongside other goods. Consider, as an example, the good of cosmic justice. It is highly plausible that a person's intentions must be evaluated to determine the morality of their actions. For instance, whether a man intended to punch his friend to genuinely harm him (as opposed to punching the friend in jest but unintentionally harming him) is critical to determining the overall morality of that action. Additionally, it is plausible that thoughts themselves can be immoral. For example, a man who willfully and consciously spends multiple hours a day thinking about how to do the most horrific things to other people is arguably doing something immoral, even if he is only thinking. Yet such examples show that cosmic justice, to be completely just, must arguably consider people's thoughts and intentions. But doing so can only be achieved, at least in principle—and almost certainly in practice—via a non-consensual and essentially continuous invasion of people's privacy, as many people with immoral intentions and thoughts would not freely divulge them, and such intentions and thoughts could occur at any time for free-willed individuals. Consequently, while naturalist-atheism can offer full privacy, it

¹⁶ It could be objected that on some conceptions of the divine, God *can* be emotionally affected by human actions, secrets, etc. This is true, but such a conception of God need not be accepted. Yet even if it was, that does not change the point that God's fundamental nature—His omnibenevolence, for instance—will not change even if God has an emotional reaction to human activities or if human secrets lead to an emotional reaction in God.

cannot offer cosmic justice. By contrast, theism can offer cosmic justice as well as something very close to—even functionally equivalent to (especially concerning other finite persons)—the good of privacy that naturalist-atheism offers. Thus, when cosmic justice and privacy are both considered, theism arguably provides the best overall option. And supernatural-atheism can do no better than theism, for if some god or lesser entity administers cosmic justice, then that being will also need to breach people’s privacy without consent to achieve that justice. Even if karma is posited as a way to administer cosmic justice, if intentions and thoughts must be factored in for the latter to be achieved, then even karma must breach people’s privacy without consent in order to weigh their thoughts.¹⁷ Consequently, if anti-theists argue that privacy is a right that should not be breached without consent, then it seems that maintaining that right negates the possibility of cosmic justice—at least in principle, and almost certainly in practice. By contrast, theism and some forms of supernatural-atheism can offer something close to perfect privacy, but still offer cosmic justice.

Finally, there is the tangential point that God arguably has a justifiable reason to breach human privacy that is directly related to human interests. Specifically, if God is to offer human beings an eternal afterlife either with Him or not, then He must know people’s genuine desire for which afterlife they want. But given the human propensity for self-deception, an individual’s self-disclosure about which afterlife they want may not be sufficiently trustworthy for such an important eternal decision (or, alternatively, a person’s verbal claim to, say, genuinely repent of some sin may not be genuine after all). Thus, God may need to breach a person’s privacy for their own good, thereby making the breach of that privacy a valuable good to such a person.¹⁸

¹⁷ One could argue that, if karma is an unconscious mechanism, then it does not *know* human secrets, and so is better than theism concerning privacy because it seems to achieve the good of cosmic justice alongside the good of privacy. But if the concern with human privacy is the breaching of that privacy without consent, then any form of karma that achieves full cosmic justice (which would include weighing human intentions and private thoughts) would still breach that privacy, even if it does not *know* the secrets it has acquired. So, karma either breaches human privacy just as theism does, or it does not achieve cosmic justice. Yet if the concern with privacy is what could happen to a person if their secrets were revealed, then again, theism and karma are equivalent, for, as argued, God would not divulge those secrets. Thus, in the end, karma gains no advantage over theism regarding privacy. Additionally, Bruce R. Reichenbach (1989, 145) notes that some have argued that, given the difficulty of accounting for how karma could work naturally, a supervising god of some sort is a necessary component of any karma-like system. But if *that* is the case, then karma truly is no better than theism concerning the good of privacy.

¹⁸ Like certain anti-theists, Michael Tooley (2020, 65–67) agrees that violating human privacy without consent is *prima facie* wrong and is only justified for outweighing good reasons. Finding no

Knowledge

Another alleged downside of theism is that it undermines human knowledge. Stephen Maitzen (2020, 139) argues that a supernatural—and especially a theistic—world is “magical” because purposes are fundamental to such worlds; they go “all the way down.” By contrast, on naturalism, purposes are not fundamental; rather, natural mechanisms are, which allows “*human discovery to be limitless in depth*” (Maitzen 2020, 139). Thus, for Maitzen, “magical” worlds are those without a mechanism at their foundational point of reality. He writes that theism “says that something magical stands at the foundation of our universe: a nonphysical God who created the universe from nothing, without exploiting any laws of nature, and without relying on any mechanism” (Maitzen 2020, 140). This is allegedly a problem because:

If the universe is at bottom magical, then our inescapably nonmagical ways of figuring it out are doomed to fail eventually. According to naturalism, by contrast, nothing magical stands at the foundation of our universe, so there’s no reason in principle why science can’t make our knowledge of the origin and workings of the universe even deeper. . . . On theism, therefore, we can’t hope to understand the universe as deeply as we might want by means of our most reliable (i.e., natural-scientific) methods (Maitzen 2020, 140–1).

And since increasing human knowledge and understanding of the universe is a good, then theism allegedly undermines that good to some extent. The problem for Maitzen, however, is two-fold.

First, his worry assumes a naturalistic view of the world, for natural-scientific methods are only our most reliable means of understanding the universe *if* naturalist-atheism is true, as there are no other means on that view. By contrast, if theism is true, then, at least in principle, there is another way to learn about the universe: namely, testimony from the divine creator of the universe (i.e., revelation), which could be provided both in this life and the next. Moreover, since that testimony would come from a source that cannot lie and is Knowledge itself, then *it* would be our most reliable method for understanding the universe. Thus,

such reasons in all cases, Tooley overcomes this privacy issue by denying God’s omniscience. However, ensuring cosmic justice and salvific accuracy arguably provide the outweighing good reasons that Tooley’s argument demands, thus justifying God’s breach of human privacy while maintaining His omniscience.

concerning the acquisition of knowledge, theism is not as restricted as naturalist-atheism is.

The second issue for Maitzen is that even if his reasoning is accepted for the sake of argument, it is questionable whether atheistic worlds are any less “magical” than theistic ones.

Consider, for instance, the obvious point that supernatural-atheism broadly suffers from the same types of concerns about “magic” as theism does. After all, the purposes of a god-like entity (or entities) could be fundamental to an atheistic reality, and even if such an entity was not a creator of that reality, if it had any significant power—such as the power to ensure cosmic justice—it could make its purposes/desires critical to that reality. For example, it could change the laws of nature at will, cause miracles to occur, create its own universes, etc. And, naturally, those purposes/desires could not be studied scientifically, which is Maitzen’s worry. Thus, his concerns would remain on such a view. Moreover, even on an atheistic view with only something like karma or Platonic forms, such views also seem “magical,” as neither karma nor Platonic forms can be studied scientifically, and yet they would be fundamental aspects of such supernatural-atheistic realities. Consequently, supernatural-atheism gains little-to-no axiological advantage over theism with respect to knowledge, as it also suffers from Maitzen-like concerns.

It is also questionable whether naturalist-atheism can avoid these concerns. Consider, for instance, that to avoid the conclusion of the *kalam* cosmological argument—an argument which claims that the universe began to exist, and thus had a cause of its existence—certain thinkers contend that although the universe began to exist, it had no cause; it came uncaused from absolute nothingness (Loke 2022, 37–80). But if that is the case, then the universe’s existence is magical in Maitzen’s sense of the term given that there is no mechanism by which it came about and thus mechanisms do not “go all the way down” in an atheistic world where this occurred—which is allegedly what the problem is. And things may be even worse for the naturalist, because the *kalam*-endorsing theist, though positing no material cause for the origin of the universe, at least posits an efficient cause: namely, God’s action. By contrast, the atheist who claims the universe came about uncaused, posits neither a material cause nor an efficient one. The universe’s existence is just an uncaused brute fact (i.e., a thing or event with no explanation). Thus, naturalism’s “magic” concerning the very foundation of the universe is arguably worse than theism’s (assuming that the universe did indeed begin to exist). Note, moreover, how this could undermine the limitlessness of human discovery that naturalism allegedly allows: not only would no mechanism to the creation of the universe be

discovered, but scientists might search endlessly for such a mechanism, all the while failing to realize that the universe's creation had no cause or mechanism.¹⁹

The problem for naturalists, however, may extend even further. Edward Feser (2017, 148–153 & 161–3), for instance, has argued that accepting the (Thomistic) principle of sufficient reason (PSR)—the idea that everything which is, has a sufficient reason for existing—leads to theism, while not accepting it forces the naturalist to accept the existence of brute facts. And some atheists have indeed considered brute facts to be a real possibility; for instance, against one version of the fine-tuning argument, Elliott Sober (2019, 37) notes that one response to such an argument “begins with the possibility that fundamental laws might be brute facts, meaning that they have no explanation at all.” It is acknowledged that the PSR—and hence arguments based on it—is controversial, but *if* Feser is correct that the PSR leads to theism, meaning that the naturalist must deny it and accept the existence of brute facts, then it seems that naturalistic worlds are also “magical” in Maitzen’s sense. For at bottom, there is no mechanism that explains them or can be appealed to. And the situation potentially worsens for the naturalist, for Feser (2017, 153) further argues that “we can have no good reason to think *anything* is explicable unless we also admit that *everything* is.” Thus, if a naturalist admits some brute facts into his worldview, then that may cause the bruteness to spread across his entire worldview, making naturalistic worlds as magical or even more magical than theism would be. While it is beyond the scope of this work to fully develop this argument, the point is that anti-theism arguably poses as much of a threat to human knowledge and its pursuit in this life as theism does (again, assuming that Maitzen’s worry is legitimate).

Yet it is when theism is considered in its totality that its advantage over atheism in terms of knowledge becomes apparent. For consider that, as noted earlier, on theism, humans become intimately united to God and partake of His nature. Consequently, whereas, at best, naturalist-atheism offers human beings the chance to gain *some* knowledge during their existence, and for the human species to accumulate *some* knowledge collectively, that knowledge is fleeting, both for

¹⁹ An objector could argue that if it became known and accepted that the universe’s existence was just a brute fact, then this explanation might be more satisfying than a theistic one to a naturalist with Maitzen’s concerns. But if that is the case, then the theist can reply with two points. First, Maitzen’s alleged worry on theism is the lack of a mechanism for creation, and since this worry would still exist on a brute fact view, then a naturalist who is satisfied with that view is inconsistent. Second, if brute facts are satisfactory for the naturalist in this case, then the theist can argue that God’s ability to create the universe is itself just a type of brute fact. In both cases, no mechanism is posited, and so the theistic view is no more problematic than the naturalist-atheistic one if brute facts are acceptable.

individual humans and very likely for the species itself (given the latter's likely extinction with the heat death of the universe). By contrast, theism not only allows for the accumulation of individual and collective knowledge in this life—as naturalism does—but that knowledge will be preserved in the afterlife. More importantly, theism not only offers the chance for revelation from an impeccable source in this life (as alluded to earlier), it also offers every human the chance to eventually be united to Knowledge itself (i.e., God) and thus to gain the sum of all knowledge. To know everything that could be known, and to know it via the most reliable way possible: directly from the source. Moreover, through such knowledge, God's purposes would also be known, and so theism's "magical" elements would eventually be explained, thus negating Maitzen's worry.

However, given that God is infinite, could *He* ever be fully known? If not, then would humans not lack the good of *full* knowledge and understanding on theism? Lougheed (2020, 157) argues that this is so:

If God is infinite and humans are [finite²⁰], then it is in principle impossible for humans to understand God. Additionally, if in order to completely understand a thing we must know what it is like to be that thing then complete understanding of God is necessarily impossible. A human could not know what it is like to be God without in fact being God. And a human cannot be God.

But is a complete understanding of God truly impossible? If humans can partake of the divine nature and become like God, they can arguably know God as He knows Himself, or very close to it. It also seems possible that an omnipotent God could give such knowledge, or something very close to it, to perfected humans if He wished. Moreover, on Christian theism, it is already posited that, in Jesus Christ, God became man, having both a fully divine nature and a fully human one (Catechism, §§479–483). On that view, therefore, the conjoining of a divine nature and a human one is at least possible, making it plausible that an omnipotent God could do the reverse of Christ and join saved human beings to the divine nature and its omniscience.

Even without such Christian commitments, Lougheed's objection can arguably be countered, at least if God is fundamentally conceived of as a person, which many theists take Him to be. For if God is fundamentally a person like human persons, then human beings can understand God by understanding themselves. Granted, God has significantly more power, knowledge, etc. than humans do, but humans

²⁰ In his book, Lougheed (2020, 157) writes that if "God is infinite and humans are infinite, then..." However, given the context of that passage, I believe the latter "infinite" should actually be "finite," hence the inclusion of that term in the quotation.

already differ amongst themselves concerning these traits, yet it is not claimed that humans cannot understand each other as persons. This generates a dilemma for Lougheed and his claim above, a claim that is part of his Complete Understanding Argument (CUA) for anti-theism. Lougheed (2020, 156–161) argues that, on naturalist-atheism, humans can achieve complete understanding, at least in principle, which is something that theism cannot offer due to Lougheed's aforementioned claim (or, at the very least, humans can achieve *more* understanding on naturalist-atheism than on theism due to that issue (Lougheed, 2023)). Lougheed's argument, however, implies that human beings need not know what it is like to be another *particular* human person to understand what it is like to be a person in general. If it did, then Lougheed's CUA for naturalist-atheism would be significantly weakened, as I have never personally experienced what it is like to be my neighbor, or my aunt, and so forth, and never could. Consequently, if doing so was required for Lougheed's argument, then complete (or even significant) understanding would be quite distant on naturalist-atheism. This means that for complete understanding in Lougheed's sense, it is sufficient that a human person understand what it is like to be a person through their own experiences as a person. But then, a human person can fundamentally understand what it is like to be God, as both God and humans are, at their core, persons (or so some theists believe).

Lougheed might object that God is a divine person, not a human person, so things are not analogous. Yet human persons differ significantly amongst themselves. For instance, someone with autism, or an extreme genius, are vastly different from most people, yet for Lougheed's CUA to work, he must admit that a person still understands what it is like to be such individuals just from understanding himself as a person, the vast differences notwithstanding. And yet, it seems arbitrary to claim that such differences are irrelevant between humans but count in God's case. Finally, even God's perfect nature does not generate a sufficient difference to salvage Lougheed's argument *if* humans will also eventually be perfected, as it has been argued they will be on theism, for then humans will share that trait with God and so understand it. Thus, if God is taken to be a person and if theism leads to perfected human beings, then complete understanding, or something very close to it, can be had on theism.

Additionally, in the afterlife, God could convey knowledge about His inner life to saved human beings in the same way that humans currently do with each other: via testimony. And since God is perfectly honest and could make Himself perfectly understood, while having an eternity to convey His testimony, it is plausible that saved human beings could gradually learn a great deal, even all, about God's

thoughts, intentions, reasons for action, etc. from such testimony.²¹ As Elizabeth Jackson (forthcoming, 20) notes when making a similar point, such testimony could make human access to true beliefs, knowledge, etc. “*unlimited*.” This point, when combined with the ones above, further reinforces the plausibility of complete understanding on theism, or at least an understanding that is no less than on naturalist-atheism.

An anonymous reviewer, however, objects that nothing in the theistic or Christian traditions guarantees human beings complete understanding in the afterlife, neither understanding of God Himself nor complete understanding of other things. Though perhaps true, several responses are available here.²²

First, if saved human beings are perfected and become like God, it could be argued that this plausibly implies the partaking of God’s attributes by those human beings, including attributes like God’s perfect knowledge and understanding, both of Himself and of other things.

Second, consider the plausible notion that a loving God wants what is best for saved human beings alongside the further notion that possessing knowledge and understanding is a great good, with the possession of all knowledge and understanding, including knowledge of God Himself, arguably being the greatest knowledge-focused good that could exist. This combination leads to the conclusion that, on theism (including Christian theism), a loving God would give the good of complete knowledge and understanding to saved human beings, or as much of it as He could (again, this argument needs further development, but it supports the case that, even on mere theism, God would likely grant saved human beings complete understanding and knowledge).

Finally, it could be argued that it is irrelevant if theism or Christian theism, *as currently construed*, do not guarantee saved human beings complete knowledge and understanding. This is because, as Kahane (2019, 227; 2020, 119) notes concerning atheistic worlds, answering the axiological question allows one to consider various possible worlds. Thus, even if the actual theistic world is not like the best axiological one that there could be, it is still possible to compare the best theistic worlds to atheistic ones. This would allow a person to determine that theism is axiologically

²¹ It is also plausible that as perfected beings, saved humans would not forget anything they learned, meaning that they would eternally retain all divine testimony provided to them.

²² I say “perhaps,” because Thomas Aquinas (1265–1274/1947, Supplement to the Third Part, Q92, Article 3) does state that “it is possible that all [both angels and saved human beings (i.e., saints)] will know everything that God knows by the knowledge of [the Beatific] vision.” Thus, at least in the Christian tradition, there are hints of saved individuals gaining complete knowledge and understanding in the afterlife.

better than anti-theism, even if the actual theistic world is not like the best theistic world that is possible. Consequently, even if the form of theism that grants saved human beings complete knowledge and understanding (including full knowledge of God) is deemed questionable, it is still a form of theism and thus remains an axiologically better world than a naturalist-atheist one.

So, concerning the good of knowledge, it is questionable whether atheism (supernatural or natural) is any less magical than theism is. And theism, when considered in its totality, plausibly offers greater advantages than naturalist-atheism does by giving human beings complete knowledge and understanding—or something very close to it—of both the world *and* of God.

Self-Sacrifice and Choice

Some anti-theists argue that a specific type of self-sacrifice is a good that is unavailable on theism. Loughheed (2020, 144–52), for instance, admits that the good of sacrifice can occur on theism, such as someone sacrificing their earthly life for someone else; however, he also argues that *genuine* self-sacrifice (GSS)—where a person sacrifices something and never receives any form of compensation for it—is impossible on any form of theism that admits that God cannot co-exist with gratuitous evil, because if no such evil exists, then any sacrifice will be justly compensated, such as through eternal life.

Assuming, for the sake of argument, that GSS is indeed a good, I contend that Loughheed's claim is overstated. GSS, or something very close to it, is available on theism. For consider that on theism, a person can reject eternal life with God (either by actively rejecting God or by failing to repent of their sins).²³ This means that someone who sacrificed herself could refuse the compensation of eternal life for it; she could reject God and refuse the good afterlife in order to make her sacrifice genuine, if the latter was so important to her (Catechism, §1033). Moreover, such a sacrifice would be greater—or at least as great—than it would be on naturalist-atheism, as it would mean *eternal* separation from God and the beatific vision. Furthermore, for theistic traditions that accept annihilationism (where those who reject God are (eventually) extinguished from existence), a decision to reject eternal life, and thus be annihilated, would lead to the same outcome as on naturalist-atheism, meaning that the outcome of the self-sacrifice would be *de facto* the same. And theism can even accommodate both these views simultaneously, where God

²³ And again, this claim can be argued for via reason alone. For instance, a theist could argue that an omnibenevolent God would not force a person into eternal life with Him against the person's wishes, meaning that afterlife choice is arguably entailed by mere theism.

leaves some people in hell but annihilates others, perhaps based on their desires (note, moreover, that all these options—eternal hell, annihilationism, or both—are compatible with the beatific vision for those who desire God and are saved).

Additionally, even if the above form of GSS occurred on theism, gratuitous evil would still not exist, for it is a greater good that a person who rejects God not be forced to be with Him than the opposite, regardless of whether the person was actually compensated for her sacrifice or not (although the possibility to be compensated would remain, even if rejected by the person herself). Thus, the person who strongly desires GSS can have it—or something very close to it—while God keeps the world free of gratuitous evil.

This issue of GSS also raises the question of whether theism offers an additional good that naturalist-atheism does not: namely, the good of making a *choice* about one's sacrifice. For, as mentioned, on theism, if an individual who has sacrificed herself does not want an afterlife with God, it can be refused, and that allows the individual to choose how to proceed after her earthly sacrifice, which is a good in and of itself. Yet this good is not available on naturalist-atheism, for on that view, non-existence is the unavoidable afterlife of *all* who engage in self-sacrifice, and so no such choice can exist. Thus, theism offers the possibility of GSS, or something very close to it, while adding the good of choice about that sacrifice.

Finally, while quasi-theistic forms of supernatural-atheism could arguably offer the same theistic benefits as those noted directly above, versions of supernatural-atheism that endorse impersonal and law-like forces like karma could not, as the latter would mechanistically reward all types of sacrifice and not allow for post-mortem choice. Thus, in this area, theism also has advantages over some forms of supernatural-atheism.

Hierarchy

Leaving aside knowledge and self-sacrifice, Kahane (2020, 110) argues that the primary problem with a theistic world is its hierarchical nature; he notes that in a theistic universe “we necessarily occupy a subordinate position in relation to a being that is vastly superior to us in every respect.”

But atheism fares no better than theism concerning hierarchy when it is considered in a general sense. First, supernatural-atheisms that include god-like entities raise hierarchical worries similar to that of theism. Second, the situation does not improve much for naturalist-atheism or forms of supernatural-atheism that appeal to forces like karma. After all, even if God did not exist, my current position would still be subordinate to people who are vastly superior to me in every respect.

For example, there currently exist numerous people who are vastly wealthier and more intelligent than I am, as well as more physically capable, knowledgeable, powerful, etc. And, on naturalist-atheism, I will cease to exist before ever equalizing that earthly hierarchy. But even given an afterlife with karma, the issue of hierarchy would continue, as there would be many people more richly rewarded and more highly elevated than me by the law-like process of karma.

Nevertheless, an anti-theist might retort that God is superior to human persons to a degree that other humans are not, and in that sense He is “vastly” superior to human beings. But if the worry is not hierarchy *simpliciter*, but rather the degree of hierarchy, then the anti-theist must provide a non *ad hoc* definition of what counts as “vastly superior” and why the clear superiority of some humans over others does not count as “vast.” After all, at least in some cases, it is. For instance, a multi-billionaire’s buying power and influence seems vastly superior to that of someone who makes less than one dollar a day. And the intellect of a genius seems vastly superior to that of a person with mental disabilities; perhaps not as vast as that of God, but still vast in real terms. Thus, it seems suspect for the concept of “vastness” to be restricted only to God or god-like beings. Nor would the fact that the superiority rests in one being (God) rather than in many others (humanity) negate the worries of that superiority and hierarchy, as on the latter I would still—to paraphrase Kahane—occupy a subordinate position in relation to beings that are vastly superior to me in (almost) every respect. Consequently, the theist could argue that Kahane’s worry about hierarchy still exists on naturalist-atheism, just in a modified way.²⁴

But perhaps the difference is that, on theism, humans are *necessarily* inferior to God, whereas on naturalist-atheism, human inferiority is only contingent and, unlike theism, humans could potentially overcome the inferiority that they possess in relation to other beings. There is some merit to this objection, but it is irrelevant in real terms, as it is practically impossible to remove hierarchy from groups of persons even on naturalist-atheism. Moreover, even if perfect or near perfect equality could be achieved on naturalist-atheism, the alleged good of the removal of hierarchy would actually bring with it the removal (or near removal) of what I contend would be the good and beauty of human difference (i.e., that different people have different levels of skill, intellect, talents, etc.). Thus, the greater the alleged good of equality (same intellectual capacity, same skills, talents, powers,

²⁴ And this does not even consider that, on naturalist-atheism, there could exist non-human persons who are so superior to human beings that they would be like gods, thereby generating the same hierarchical worries that theism does.

etc.), the more the good of difference and variety is undermined, meaning that naturalist-atheism gains one good only at the expense of another.

Additionally, the pro-theist can counterattack the anti-theist's position concerning hierarchy in three ways.

First, the pro-theist can argue that in any world with genuine persons, hierarchies of some sort will always exist. But theism offers the best form of hierarchy: namely, one with an omnibenevolent and *perfect* being at the top. By contrast, supernatural-atheism offers worlds with less-than-perfect beings at the top, and naturalist-atheism offers worlds with various hierarchies crowned by flawed persons. Consequently, since humans must live in a hierarchical world of some type, it is better to live in one with perfection and omnibenevolence at its pinnacle.

Second, if humans can eventually become sons of God and partakers of the divine nature—as noted above—then they partake of the highest point of the theistic hierarchy. This removes a great deal of the sting of that hierarchy and also reinforces the superiority of theistic hierarchies over others. This latter point also addresses another minor complaint that Kahane (2020, 111) makes against theism, which is that humans would be cosmically insignificant in a theistic world given God's overwhelming presence. But if humans literally partake in the divine nature and become sons of God, then they are by no means insignificant, but as significant as God Himself (or something very close to it).

The third way the pro-theist can counter the hierarchy issue is by noting that if the anti-theist has no problem with hierarchies *among persons* (and if he does, then the issues noted above arise), then the theist can argue that God is, fundamentally, a person, just a supremely powerful and knowledgeable one. But since human persons already vary in terms of their power and knowledge, and if hierarchies among persons is not an issue, then adding a "God-person" to that hierarchy is no more problematic—at least in principle—than, say, adding a human genius to it. Both cases involve the addition of a person who is different from others in terms of intellect, power, etc., but merely because one was a God-person and the other a human person would not negate the fact that, at its fundamental level, the hierarchy in question was still person-based. And this should be fine for those who accept hierarchies among persons. Furthermore, if the problem is, once again, that God is "vastly" greater than other persons within that overall hierarchy, then a non-arbitrary definition of "vastly" would need to be provided, which—as noted above—seems difficult to do in a robust way.

While more needs to be said about the axiological issues surrounding hierarchy, this section has arguably shown that the issue does not clearly favor anti-theism over pro-theism.

Independence

Another alleged concern with theism is that it undermines human independence. Kahane (2020, 111) writes that in a theistic world

our ability to shape and govern our own lives, to define our own purposes and stand independent, our own masters, would be dramatically limited. There is a sense in which, in a theist universe, we remain in a child-like state, unable to fully grow up to become completely independent persons who are fully in charge of their own lives. . . .

But this strikes me as mistaken,²⁵ even if theism is just being compared to naturalist-atheism.²⁶ This is because, far from undermining human independence and choice, theism exalts them and promotes the good of human choice more than naturalist-atheism does. For on theism, humans can indeed define their purpose and shape their lives as they wish, it is just that theism offers humans one more choice in doing so: namely, the choice of aligning their purpose and life with God's purpose for their life. And far from remaining child-like in a theistic universe, persons in such a universe are charged with the most important decision of all: choosing their eternal fate (via repentance and a desire to be with God or not).

Moreover, on forms of theism that endorse annihilationism (which, again, is compatible with the beatific vision), the anti-theist's life—or the life of anyone who wants to reject God—is arguably no different than if naturalist-atheism were true. Specifically, in her earthly life, the anti-theist can do what she wishes and make her own purposes. And, in the afterlife, the anti-theist can choose annihilation (eternal non-existence), which is the same fate as on naturalist-atheism, thus making her

²⁵ Loughheed (2020, 117–9) also rejects this anti-theist independence argument from Kahane, noting that it is better viewed as a dignity-related issue (which is partially addressed in the section on hierarchy).

²⁶ In this section, I only focus on naturalist-atheism, as supernatural-atheism would arguably raise the same (or many of the same) “independence” concerns as theism does, giving it little advantage over theism. In fact, in some circumstances, supernatural-atheism may present a greater risk to independence than theism ostensibly does. For example, imagine a powerful god-like entity who is largely good, but not wholly good. Call this entity Nice-god (Ng). It is precisely Ng who might *force* individuals to worship him or have a relationship with him for their own good. Indeed, because Ng knows that having a relationship with him and worshipping him is good for humans, but because he is not wholly good, Ng is willing to override human autonomy to force those things upon human beings. By contrast, it is precisely God's omnibenevolence that prevents Him from doing the same. Given His nature, God will not force individuals to be with Him who did not freely wish to do so.

existence *de facto* the same as if naturalist-atheism were true. In fact, certain forms of theism can offer the anti-theist *more* choice and independence than naturalist-atheism, for the anti-theist could potentially choose annihilation or a continuing eternal existence, but one independent of God (i.e., hell). And in the latter state, the anti-theist need not worship God nor answer to Him, and thus the anti-theist could continue being her own independent master for as long as she wished. Thus, an atheist who discovers that God exists (and, like Kahane (2020, 105), finds a relationship with Him unappealing), need not feel any disappointment because that atheist's existence (both in her earthly life and the next) need not change from the way she would have acted if naturalist-atheism were true.²⁷

And again, this reinforces the earlier point that theism arguably has an axiological advantage over naturalist-atheism because the former offers human persons *more* choice. Specifically, those who wish to be united to God for eternity can make that choice, whereas those who wish to keep existing, but free of God, can choose that, and those who wish to cease existing (as would be the case on naturalist-atheism), can choose that as well. Naturalist-atheism, by contrast, removes these choices from everyone, even those who desire unity with God.

It could be objected that the type of theism offered above is not widely held (i.e., where annihilation is a choice alongside an eternal heaven or hell). But again, even if this were correct, it would be irrelevant, because a theistic world where such a choice exists is possible and so can be posited in the axiological debate to show theism's advantage over atheism, even if it is not the actual theistic world that exists.

Pro-Theism in Totality

I have argued that theism not only offers unique goods that cannot be had on any form of atheism, but also that many of the alleged axiological advantages that anti-theism holds over theism collapse, or largely collapse, upon deeper scrutiny. Yet, as seen above, in many cases, these good were assessed independently. But which view offers the best overall *combination* of goods is also a relevant question to consider. And here, theism arguably has the advantage. For instance, consider a law-like

²⁷ An anonymous reviewer wonders if the very possibility of choosing hell is an axiological disadvantage. Perhaps, but it strikes me that if a person is given the options of hell, as well as annihilation and heaven, then the possibility of choosing hell is actually an advantage. This is because there may be individuals who prefer hell to annihilation or heaven, so if the possibility of choosing hell did not exist, that would not be good for such individuals. By contrast, the options of heaven (continued existence with God), hell (continued existence without God), and annihilation (nonexistence) offer all human beings all the afterlife options they could desire, which is a good.

karma or Platonic process that achieves the good of cosmic justice, but fails to provide the good of afterlife choice and of being perfected. Such a combination of goods is less than the goods that theism offers, as the latter offers all those goods. Alternatively, a god-like, but less-than-perfect being who can achieve cosmic justice will possess all the alleged negatives that God does—like breaching one's privacy—but will not be able to perfect people or allow for a mutual relationship with perfection, both of which theism offers. And naturalist-atheism may offer complete privacy, but not ultimate cosmic justice, whereas theism achieves the latter while allowing for *de facto* complete privacy.

Granted, a complete comparison between theism and all alternatives cannot be offered here; the point, however, is that when theistic goods are examined in totality and then compared to the goods offered by anti-theism, it is plausible that theism is the better axiological position.

At the same time, certain forms of theism may be axiologically better than others. For instance, something like Molinistic-universalist theism—where human beings make free choices in this life, but where God so arranges the world that all humans ultimately freely choose salvation—may be better than other forms of theism. This is because this form of theism ensures that all humans not only possess the good of choice and the opportunity to partake in the perfection-related goods noted earlier, but that they all *actually* partake of those goods eventually (as they are all saved). Thus, the axiology of theism should also consider such differences within pro-theism, though doing so in detail is outside the scope of this work.

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