

INVITATION TO THE AXIOLOGY OF THEISM

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“What difference would – or does – God’s existence make?” In recent years, philosophers of religion have begun to tackle this question with vigour and rigour.¹ As with many philosophical questions, it is deceptively simple to pose, but enormously difficult to answer. In this chapter, I set the stage for the remainder of the volume by introducing the reader to some of the core issues at stake in this area. I hope to be an impartial guide to this unfolding discussion.

The phrase “axiology of theism” can be misleading in two respects, and so some preliminary clarifications are needed. First, since “theism” is sometimes taken to mean “belief in God”, the phrase “axiology of theism” can prompt the thought that the chief task here is to evaluate the (dis)value or (dis)utility of belief in God, or perhaps of some individual or society engaging in religious practices oriented towards God. While these are important projects in their own right, this literature does not concern them. Instead, the central goal is to attempt to understand the axiological import of God’s existence, or non-existence, for the world and its inhabitants. Second, while most of the discussion has indeed been about this issue, an important subsidiary thread has considered what sorts of preferences can be rational with respect to God’s existence or non-existence. As we will see, one point of dispute has been whether preferences must track axiological judgments in order to be rational.

In section 1, I attempt to clarify the central axiological question. In section 2, I distinguish a range of positions that might be held on this issue. In section 3, I set out some considerations favouring each of the main positions. In section 4, I consider some connections between the debate about the axiological consequences of God’s existence and the debate about whether God exists. In section 5, I turn to the debate about rational preferences concerning God’s existence or non-existence. Finally, in section 6, I summarize the contributions to this volume and draw key connections between them.

1. Clarifying the Axiological Question

In this section, I set out sixteen considerations relevant to how to understand the following question: “What difference would – or does – God’s existence make?”

1. This question is phrased carefully in order to be neutral between two perspectives: that of someone who believes that God exists, and that of someone who does not believe that God exists. (The latter, of course, may be either an agnostic or an atheist. Moreover, the latter clearly needn’t be non-religious – there are many, many non-theistic religious systems and worldviews, after all.) The theist thinks that God exists, and so when she poses this question, she asks what difference God’s existence really does make. The non-theist, on the other hand, asks what difference God’s existence would make, were God to exist.
2. This question does not encode any account of who or what God is, and, of course, many, many different models of God have been discussed by theologians, philosophers, and others throughout human history. Clearly, then, how one answers this question will depend enormously on who or what one takes God to be. Most contributors to this debate, including the authors featured in this volume, take God to be omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and the creator and sustainer of all that contingently exists.² This is an enormously influential and important model of God – and one much-loved by analytic philosophers of religion – but, of course, this question could just as well be tackled with

respect to other models of God.³ More broadly still, similar axiological questions could be posed about non-theistic worldviews or belief systems, whether religious or otherwise.

3. Sometimes, contributors to this discussion focus on 'bare theism' – that is, they concentrate on the characteristics of God set out above, and attempt to determine their axiological import. But sometimes other features of God (or, more broadly, features of typical theistic worldviews) are considered. For example, some have discussed the axiological implications of the view that, given theism, all human persons possess eternal life. Additional features of God, or of theistic worldviews, can be called 'expansions' of bare theism.
4. The 'difference' referred to in the question is generally taken to be a difference in *value*. So, for example, someone might say that God's existence would make, or does make, things *better*. There are, however, many ways of specifying value: intrinsic, instrumental, aesthetic, prudential, moral, etc. The philosophers involved in this discussion have generally focused on the intrinsic value of God's existence, and on the intrinsic and moral effects of God's (non)existence for the world, and for persons and their lives.
5. This foregrounds the question of what the 'things' are to which God's existence might make an axiological difference. One candidate is the *actual world*. On this way of understanding the matter, our question asks what difference God's existence would or does make to the value of the actual world. Another candidate value-bearer, as suggested in point 4, is *persons*. On this way of framing the issue, our question asks what difference in value God's existence would or does make for some or all persons (or perhaps to the lives they lead). In points 6-13 I consider the world-based construals of our question, and in points 14-16, I turn to person-based construals.

World-Based Construals

6. Suppose, for the moment, that the relevant value-bearer is the actual world, and that the scope of the intended comparison encompasses all of it. Someone who tackles our axiological question in this fashion aims to determine what difference God's existence would or does make to the *overall* value of the actual world.⁴ Alternatively, the question could be construed as asking what difference God's existence would or does make to some feature(s) or proper part(s) of the actual world, without commitment to any global claims about the overall axiological status of any worlds. Answers that focus on the *overall* axiological status of a world, or on the overall status of some feature(s) or proper part(s) of a world, can be classified as *wide*. Answers that focus on the axiological status of a world, or on some of its features or proper parts, *in some respect only*, can be classified as *narrow*.
7. Whether the question is taken to concern the actual world as a whole, or just some of its features or proper parts, answering it seems to demand a comparison, and so it is important to consider exactly what is being compared. The broadest version would presumably involve comparing all worlds that *include* God with all worlds that *lack* God – either overall or with respect to some feature(s) or proper part(s). At the other extreme, the most restricted comparison would be between the actual world, as one takes it to be *qua* theist or non-theist, and the closest comparator world in which one's own position about theism is false – again, either overall or with respect to some feature(s) or proper part(s). (The theist, for example, would aim to compare the value of the actual world – whether overall or in some respect – with *how things would otherwise be*; i.e., how things

are in the nearest possible world in which theism is false.) In between these limit cases are other alternative construals of the comparison that could be explored. For example, one might think that the former construal is too broad, and the latter too narrow. Accordingly, one might wish to determine what difference God's existence would or does make, not just to the actual world, but to worlds that are relevantly and sufficiently similar to the actual world. Of course, attempts to construe the question in this fashion bear the burden of developing and defending some account of what the relevant similarities are, and of the desired degree of similarity, in order to fix the referents for comparison.⁵

Challenges for World-Based Construals

8. Suppose that someone aims to compare the value of all worlds that contain God with all worlds that lack God – either in toto or with respect to some feature(s) or proper part(s). An epistemic objection might be levelled: someone might say that such a task is simply beyond our intellectual abilities.⁶ Alternatively, a metaphysical objection might be levelled: someone might say that failures of commensurability or comparability render the desired task impossible. Suppose, instead, that someone aims to engage in the more restricted comparison sketched in point 7, by comparing the actual world, as one takes it to be *qua* theist or non-theist, with the closest comparator world in which one's own position about theism is false. Here are three possible objections. First, there may be no such thing as a unique closest possible world in either scenario. Perhaps, for example, two or more worlds are equally – and hence unsurpassably – close to the actual world. Alternatively, perhaps worlds *asymptotically* approach ours in degree of similarity. Second, perhaps the term 'closest' is ambiguous between several different interpretations, none of which is the most suitable. And, third, even if one clear sense of 'closest' can be agreed upon, perhaps it is still vague which world is closest.
9. Moreover, even if there is a unique closest world to the actual world, the resulting comparison may not be what the inquirer really intends. As several authors have pointed out, a theist might well think that the closest possible world in which theism is false nevertheless contains a being who is as similar to God as possible without being God.⁷ Perhaps, for example, this being fails to know just one true proposition (and, accordingly, fails to be omniscient). On this construal, the comparative question for the theist would be posed as follows: "Which world is better (either overall or in some respect): the actual world, in which God exists, or the closest possible world in which God fails to exist, but an omnipotent, perfectly good being exists, who knows all true propositions save one?" The problem is that this may not be the comparison that fundamentally interests the inquirer. Indeed, most of the contributors to this debate have focused on comparing the actual world (on the assumption that God exists) to the nearest possible world in which *naturalism* is true – or, alternatively, comparing the actual world (on the assumption that naturalism is true) with the nearest possible world in which *theism* is true.⁸ In what follows, I will follow suit (notwithstanding the concerns noted in point 8).
10. A further difficulty looms for all attempts to compare worlds in which God exists with worlds in which God does not exist. Theists often hold that God not only exists in the actual world, but in *all* logically possible worlds. In other words, God's existence is *logically necessary*. On this view, there just are no logically possible worlds lacking God available for comparison. (Likewise, suppose that God's existence is impossible. If so, then there just are no logically possible worlds containing God available for comparison.) If a suitable account of *counterpossible* judgments could be found, this might permit the needed comparisons. But, on the standard Lewis-Stalnaker semantics, all counterpossible claims

turn out trivially true. Accordingly (for example), the theist who takes God's existence to be necessary would have to maintain that things would be better if, *per impossible*, God were not to exist, *and also* that things would be worse. Evidently, this is problematic.⁹ If no sense can be made of the relevant comparative judgments, conceptually or semantically, then this axiological project seems doomed. To date, various responses to this serious challenge have been explored, although no consensus has emerged. Here they are:

- (a) Kahane (2011) suggests that perhaps we *can* intelligibly evaluate impossibilities. In partial defence of this suggestion, he notes that certain other debates in the philosophy of religion appear to presuppose that we can do just this. Consider, for example, the debate about whether morality depends upon God. Kahane says: "when one of Dostoevsky's characters asserts that 'If God doesn't exist, everything is permitted', this is not meant to be an indifferent remark. It is supposed to be, and taken to be, a horrible and frightening implication of atheism" (677). Elsewhere, he rightly points out that discussions of Pascal's Wager, and of the problem of evil, also appear to presuppose that we can sensibly compare what things would be like on both theism and naturalism, and make coherent axiological comparisons (2012, 36).¹⁰ Assuming that the participants in these discussions agree that God's existence is either logically necessary or logically impossible, Kahane can be read as arguing for a legitimate presumption that the comparisons presently at issue should be deemed intelligible, since they are widely taken to be so in relevantly similar domains.
- (b) Mugg (2016) expresses some sympathy for this presumption, but seeks to go further, by offering a model of how one might consider and evaluate impossibilities. Drawing on the work of Leslie (1987), Nichols and Stich (2003), and Stanovich (2011), Mugg describes a process called *cognitive decoupling*. This occurs when "subjects extract information from a representation and perform computations on that extracted information" (448). The remaining information is kept separate from the reasoning process: it is "screened out" or "cognitively quarantined" (448). Mugg offers the example of Bugs Bunny picking up a hole, throwing it against a wall, and then jumping through. We can understand the cartoon's narrative only if we engage in cognitive decoupling, by screening out and quarantining certain beliefs that would threaten the narrative's intelligibility – for example, the belief that it's impossible to pick up a hole. By analogy, then, we can perhaps make progress on the axiology of theism by screening out beliefs that make trouble for our evaluation of impossibilities. Of course, this will require a principled way of quarantining beliefs that is invulnerable to the charge of being ad hoc, and to the charge of unduly favouring one's own position in this debate. Moreover, reasons are needed for thinking that this method for assessing impossibilities is reliable.¹¹
- (c) Another strategy, proposed by Kahane (2012) and endorsed by Moser (2013), is to make axiological judgments about closely-related states of affairs whose possibility is not disputed, and then extrapolate from these judgments to the target case. Here is an example of this method. S might confidently judge that her life is far better than it would have been, had she been born in the middle ages. But, assuming the necessity of origins, there is no possible world in which S herself really was born in the middle ages. So perhaps S's judgment is grounded in a comparison of her actual life with the medieval life of someone distinct from S, but sufficiently similar in the relevant ways. (The trick here, of course, is to identify what the 'relevant' ways are, and to clarify what 'sufficiently' means.) Likewise, if one takes God's existence to be logically impossible,

one might instead imagine a world in which a godlike being exists, and use this world as a proxy for the true object of one's axiological assessment. Kahane refers to such a proxy as an "adjacent possibility" (2012, 38), but, of course, one might wonder whether it is intelligible to think of logically impossible scenarios as being close to, or closest to, logically possible worlds.¹² Moreover, one might wonder whether intuitions about such proxy worlds can plausibly transfer to the target.¹³

- (d) Kahane (2012, 36) offers another suggestion: that progress can be made by considering *epistemic* possibilities. Consider, for example, someone who believes that God exists in all logically possible worlds, but who takes it that atheism is nevertheless epistemically possible – true for all she knows. Such a person might make headway by considering some epistemically possible (for her) world in which atheism is true, and comparing it to the actual world as she takes it to be. Likewise, someone who believes that God fails to exist in all possible worlds, but who nevertheless takes theism to be epistemically possible, can do likewise, *mutatis mutandis*. Of course, as Kahane notes, this strategy is only open to those who do not take themselves to *know* that theism (or atheism) is true. Those who take themselves to know that theism (or atheism) is true cannot, after all, deem the relevant alternative to be epistemically possible. Moreover, one might wonder whether assessments about epistemically possible worlds are indeed suitable proxies for impossibilities.
- (e) In his 2012 paper, and also in his contribution to this volume, T.J. Mawson recommends that the theist take God's existence to be metaphysically necessary but not logically necessary, and that the atheist take God's non-existence to be metaphysically necessary but not logically necessary.¹⁴ He says that both should picture modal space, geometrically, as follows. The actual world is at the centre, surrounded by a field of metaphysically possible worlds (which, of course, are also logically possible). Travelling outward through this field, one eventually crosses a boundary of sorts, and enters into a 'doughnut' of metaphysically-impossible-but-yet-logically-possible worlds. According to Mawson, the actual world can fruitfully be compared, from both the perspective of the theist and the atheist, with worlds in this doughnut. In his chapter, he proposes some candidate worlds and offers a comparative axiological assessment from the perspective of the theist and the perspective of the atheist. Of course, whatever its merits, this move is unavailable to those who think that God's existence is either logically necessary or logically impossible.

11. Suppose that a way is found to handle the challenges raised in points 8 and 10. A further matter must be considered before a comparative judgment can be attempted. Let's begin by considering the issue from the perspective of the theist who wishes to compare the overall axiological status of the actual world with the overall axiological status of the closest world in which naturalism is true. To make the issue vivid, picture what Alvin Plantinga calls the 'book' of each world – roughly, the exhaustive list of all true propositions describing that world.¹⁵ In order to fix the comparator world, one might think that the theist should just cross out 'true' beside the statement "God exists" in the book, and replace it with 'false', then do the opposite for the statement "naturalism is true", and then compare the resulting book with the actual world's book. The problem is that doing so might well seriously understate the differences between the two worlds.¹⁶ Here are three examples to illustrate the point:

- (a) Suppose it's a consequence of theism that without God, nothing contingent exists. If so, then the world to which the actual world is compared is sparsely furnished: it contains only whatever necessary existents there are apart from God.
- (b) Suppose that God is the unique source of all value. If so, then the proposed comparator world, whatever else it contains, is entirely devoid of value.¹⁷
- (c) On many expansions of bare theism, God is thought to imbue the world with teleological features – for example, the world and its inhabitants are often thought to have divinely ordained purposes. No such feature, evidently, can be present on naturalism.¹⁸

Let's consider the matter again, this time from the point of view of the naturalist.

- (d) Suppose that the naturalist takes cosmic history to have begun with the Big Bang, and takes the history of all living things on earth to be fundamentally shaped by random mutation and natural selection. As she considers the nearest theistic world, she must now imagine God playing a causal role in addition to these processes. After all, God is the creator and sustainer of all that contingently exists, and so at the very least, God must be causally responsible for the Big Bang, and must conserve its results in existence, including all the events described by evolution.¹⁹
- (e) Suppose that the naturalist is convinced that the actual world contains gratuitous evils, and that, if God were to exist, there would be no instances of gratuitous evil whatsoever.²⁰ If so, then when the naturalist attempts to hold before her mind the nearest world in which theism is true, she must either conceive of the gratuitous evils in the actual world as deleted from the theistic world altogether, or else must conceive of them as altered in some significant way. (For example, perhaps the suffering remains phenomenologically identical, but is now embedded in some larger axiological context that renders it non-gratuitous.)²¹
- (f) Suppose that the naturalist is convinced that the actual world contains instances of non-resistant nonbelief, and that if God were to exist, there would be no such instances.²² Again, as she attempts to hold before her mind the nearest world in which theism is true, she must imagine these instances either being deleted altogether, or else being modified so as to render them consistent with theism.

The moral of points (a)-(f) is just this: if the axiological inquirer aims to assess the difference that God's existence would or does make to the value of the actual world *as a whole*, care must be taken to consider just how different the comparator world is.²³

12. Perhaps, however, it is excessively hubristic to attempt axiological comparisons of the actual world *as a whole* with some comparator world(s). Perhaps, as mentioned in point 8, it is not possible in principle, due to failures of commensurability or comparability between the actual world and the intended alternative(s). Or perhaps it *is* possible in principle, but not in practice due to our epistemic limitations. (Are our cognitive powers really up to the task of correctly tracking all these changes, and assessing their axiological import?) Such concerns might motivate narrowing the scope of inquiry to the axiological implications of theism for some feature(s) or proper part(s) of the actual world. But here, too, the cautionary lesson of point 11 must be borne in mind: care must be taken to track

all the changes due to theism (or naturalism) for the relevant feature(s) or proper part(s) of worlds.²⁴

Person-Based Construals

13. As mentioned in point 5, another possible locus of axiological comparison is *persons*. A personal construal of our question asks what difference God's existence would or does make *for persons*. This could be a broad question about all persons, or it could be narrowed to pick out just some person(s). At its most autobiographical, the question could be this: would or does God's existence make things better *for me* than they would otherwise be?²⁵
14. Personal comparisons could again be *wide* or *narrow*. A wide personal comparison seeks to determine, for some or all persons, the *overall* axiological effects of theism. In contrast, a narrow personal comparison seeks to determine the axiological effects of theism for some or all persons, *in some respect or other*.
15. Once the question is construed in personalistic terms, the same issues about fixing the comparator worlds that were discussed in points 8-11 will arise. Suppose – perhaps rashly! – that they can be solved satisfactorily. Even so, further difficult questions about personal identity must be faced. On typical expansions of theism, God is taken to have created human beings in his own image, and has given them a certain teleological structure. Thus, for example, the Westminster Confession of Faith states that “Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” So consider the atheist who wishes to compare, with respect to persons, the actual world with the closest possible world in which theism is true. Both worlds feature persons, to be sure. But the persons in the theistic world are also *creatures*, divinely created and supernaturally endowed with a characteristic telos – the “chief end”. If having such a telos is an essential characteristic of persons – as theists might well suppose – then the comparative autobiographical version of the personal question is no longer intelligible. Put plainly, the atheist in question simply would not exist in the relevant theistic world. That aside, other personal comparisons may yet be possible, even in the absence of trans-world identity. For example, one might simply judge that some or all of the persons in some world(s) are better off than the persons in the other(s), without assuming personal identity across the relevant worlds.²⁶
16. Care should be taken to consider the relationships between impersonal and personal foci of axiological analysis. Consider the following example. Whether the actual world is theistic or naturalistic, there is wide agreement that it features enormous quantities of moral wrongdoing.²⁷ But on certain expansions of bare theism, all this moral wrongdoing must be viewed against the cosmic backdrop of God's nature, plans, and activities. These actions are not, theists might say, ‘just’ moral wrongdoing – they are also *sins*, offences against God.²⁸ As a result, actions that are phenomenologically indistinguishable might be *worse* on theism, due to their being sinful, than they would be on naturalism.²⁹ And plausibly, this would have *personal* consequences: a sinful action could well be personally worse for the sinner on theism than would the phenomenologically indistinguishable moral wrongdoing on naturalism. Aggregating many such actions together might have *impersonal* consequences as well: indeed, *ceteris paribus*, the world as a whole might just be worse with respect to moral action if theism is true, quite apart from being worse for persons. So it must be remembered that the very same feature may have both personal and impersonal axiological dimensions or consequences.

2. Axiological Positions

We began with this deceptively simple question: “What difference would – or does – God’s existence make?” Speaking somewhat loosely for the moment, let’s say that the *pro-theist* holds that God’s existence would or does make things better than they would otherwise be, and that the *anti-theist* holds that God’s existence would or does make things worse than they would otherwise be.³⁰ But these, of course, are not the only possible positions. The *neutralist* holds that God’s existence neither makes things better than nor worse than they would otherwise be.³¹ The *quietist* about this issue thinks that, in principle, the question is unanswerable.³² And, finally, the *agnostic* about this issue thinks that the question is answerable in principle, but nevertheless withholds judgment about it. This view could come in two forms. The *positive* agnostic has judged that, given the available arguments and evidence, suspending judgment is the most reasonable thing to do. The *withholding* agnostic, on the other hand, is someone who simply withholds judgment, even about the statement ‘agnosticism about the axiological import of God’s existence is the most reasonable position’.³³ These positions are set out in the horizontal axis of the table below. On the vertical axis of the table are three familiar positions: theism, atheism, and agnosticism. (I call these ‘existential’ positions because they concern whether God exists.)

		AXIOLOGICAL POSITIONS				
		<i>Pro-Theism</i>	<i>Anti-Theism</i>	Neutralism	Agnosticism	Quietism
EXISTENTIAL POSITIONS	Theism					
	Atheism					
	Agnosticism					

The point of bringing these together in a table is to illustrate various combinations of existential and axiological positions. A familiar one is *theistic pro-theism*. A person who holds these views believes not only that God exists, but also that God’s existence makes things better than they would otherwise be. Another common combination is *atheistic pro-theism*. A person who holds these views believes that God does not exist, but nevertheless holds that God’s existence would make things better, if God were to exist. At first glance, it might seem that every cell in the above table represents a coherent combination of positions, but this has been contested. For example, in their contributions to this volume, Michael Tooley and J.L. Schellenberg both argue that anti-theism entails atheism. If they are correct, then ‘theistic anti-theism’ represents an incoherent combination of views.³⁴

Drawing on the conceptual resources set out in Section 1, we can begin to add more precision to this table by distinguishing *personal* and *impersonal* versions of these axiological judgments. The former, obviously, focus on the axiological implications of theism for persons. The latter, meanwhile, focus on the axiological implications of theism for worlds (or their features or proper parts), without reference to whether these implications are good (or otherwise) for persons. Equally, we can distinguish *narrow* and *wide* variants of these positions. The former concern the axiological consequences of theism in *one respect* only, while the latter focus on the *overall* axiological effects of theism. The table below illustrates these distinctions for one column only – pro-theism – thereby generating twelve different broad pro-theistic positions.

		AXIOLOGICAL POSITIONS							
		Pro-Theism				Anti-Theism	Neutralism	Agnosticism	Quietism
		Impersonal		Personal					
		Narrow	Wide	Narrow	Wide				
EXISTENTIAL POSITIONS	Theism								
	Atheism								
	Agnosticism								

These distinctions can also be applied to each of the remaining four axiological positions (anti-theism, neutralism, agnosticism, and quietism), thereby generating twelve distinct variants for each, for a grand total of sixty unique combinations.

Some of these sixty combinations of existential and axiological positions can consistently be held together with other pairs. For example, consider an atheist who thinks that God’s existence would make things better for her in certain respects, but who is unsure about the overall axiological import of theism. Such an atheist would be both a *narrow personal pro-theist* and a *wide impersonal agnostic*. But, clearly, not all combinations are compossible. Most obviously, for example, a quietist of any stripe cannot also be a pro-theist, anti-theist, neutralist, or agnostic of the same stripe. To date, most work on this topic has concerned pro-theism and anti-theism, and mostly from the perspectives of the theist and the atheist. But, given the vast array of views distinguished here, it is clear that this discussion could be broadened in many ways.

For ease of expression, I have stated these axiological positions fairly loosely. However, as explained in Section 1, various precisifications of each are possible, and the main columns above could be further subdivided to distinguish these. A couple of examples will illustrate this point. A *wide, personal pro-theist* holds that God’s existence would or does make persons better off overall than they would otherwise be. But, as noted in point (13), above, this could be a view about just some persons, or about all persons. And, as noted in point (7), this view could be expressed with reference only to some possible worlds, or all possible worlds. Meanwhile, a *wide, impersonal pro-theist* holds that God’s existence would or does make ‘things’ overall better than they would otherwise be. But there are various ways to precisify ‘things’. As noted in point (6), this could be a view about one or more worlds as a whole, or it could be a view about some feature(s) or proper part(s) of worlds. The moral here is just this: it is very important to state these positions very clearly prior to evaluating them.

3. Some Considerations Supporting Each Axiological Position

In this section, I set out some reasons that have been offered (or, in some cases, merely might be offered) to support each of the five main axiological positions on the horizontal axis of the foregoing tables. I do not intend to conduct a comprehensive review of all the arguments, or a thorough analysis of the relevant disputes. Instead, my goal is simply to orient the reader to some considerations favouring each view.

Quietism

The quietist holds that some or all precisifications of the comparative question are in principle unintelligible, and hence impossible to answer sensibly. One reason for this view was mentioned

in section 1, point 10: someone who holds that theism is logically necessary (or, alternatively, that theism is logically impossible) might believe that this fact, in principle, defeats any attempt to engage in comparative axiological analysis.³⁵ A different motivation for quietism could involve incommensurability or incomparability. For example, someone who believes that all theistic worlds are overall incommensurable and incomparable with all naturalistic worlds would presumably think that no ‘world-wide’ form of the comparative question can, in principle, be answered. It’s important to see that one might be a quietist about some forms of axiological comparison, but not others. For example, suppose one holds that worlds cannot sensibly be thought to bear overall axiological status. On this view, quietism about ‘world-wide’ axiological comparisons would be in order. But one might still think it possible to compare worlds in various respects, and so one might not be a quietist about more restricted axiological judgments.

Agnosticism

As I’ve defined this view, the agnostic believes that some relevant axiological comparison is possible in principle, but also thinks that, in practice, it’s best to withhold judgment about it. As mentioned above, this view could come in two forms: positive agnosticism and withholding agnosticism. Either version can be motivated by considering the difficulties involved in making the relevant comparisons. At the broadest level, can we really be confident that we have the modal abilities to represent before our minds two or more worlds *in their entirety*, and then form an overall comparative axiological judgment about them? The agnostic might doubt this, perhaps on the general grounds that our computational power is just not up to the job of assessing all that needs to be assessed, or perhaps for the more specific reason that we lack the ability to properly grasp the import of, or connections between, some of the value-adding and value-diminishing features of worlds. At the narrow level, a different motivation for agnosticism could stem from a skepticism about our ability to adequately isolate some feature(s) or proper part(s) of a world for axiological analysis, or it could stem from skepticism about our ability to engage in comparative axiological evaluation of such proper part(s) or feature(s), even if we can isolate them adequately. Similar points might be made for personal construals of the axiological question.

Neutralism

The neutralist thinks that, with respect to some or all forms of comparison, God’s existence makes no axiological difference whatsoever. This view is distinct from and incompatible with quietism, agnosticism, pro-theism, and anti-theism. One way to be a neutralist is to take the view that God’s (non)existence has no axiological effects whatsoever. Another is to hold that the axiological downsides of God’s (non)existence are precisely counterbalanced by the axiological upsides, or perhaps by holding that the downsides and upsides are, in Ruth Chang’s sense, “on par” (Chang 1997). Neutralism has not been defended, or even discussed, in the literature to date. It might, however, inform a view that has been discussed: *apatheism*. The apatheist has an attitude of apathy or indifference towards questions pertaining to God’s (non)existence. If one thought that God’s (non)existence makes no axiological difference, one might thereby be led to apatheism.³⁶

Pro-theism

The pro-theist thinks that God’s existence would or does make things better than they would otherwise be (for some precisification of ‘things’, ‘better’, and ‘would otherwise be’). Here are several motivations for this view:

- (a) One motivation stems from the familiar theistic idea that God is an unsurpassable being – and indeed, the only such being.³⁷ One might think that any world featuring such a being

must contain superlatively more intrinsic value than any naturalistic world, merely in virtue of God's presence. And one might further think that this increase in value outweighs any putative axiological downsides that the anti-theist might posit. Such a view amounts to a strong form of wide impersonal pro-theism.³⁸

While the foregoing pro-theistic consideration appealed to God's existence, the remaining ones set out here appeal to God's nature and presumed activities, sometimes by invoking various expansions of theism.

- (b) Another impersonal motivation for pro-theism involves cosmic justice. For example, suppose it's the case that if God exists, God brings it about that the wicked always ultimately receive their just deserts, and that the good always ultimately receive their just rewards. A pro-theist might say that this makes theistic worlds better in at least this respect, and perhaps even overall, than they would otherwise be. A pro-theist might even say that it is also *personally* better for the good – and even for the wicked – to receive their just deserts. (Of course, there is also a familiar sense in which the truth of such an expanded theism is personally *worse* for the wicked – they may not wish to receive their just deserts, after all!)³⁹
- (c) It has often been held that only God's existence can anchor objective morality. Assuming that the presence of objective morality is a good-making feature, this claim can be harnessed to support pro-theism.⁴⁰
- (d) As noted earlier, it is often thought that God would prevent every occurrence of gratuitous evil, and that this fact would make things better than they would otherwise be.
- (e) Relatedly, some philosophers accept versions of a patient-centred restriction (PCR) on the divine permission of evil.⁴¹ Strong forms of this restriction hold that God will permit someone to suffer evil only if the suffering ultimately benefits that very individual. Since there is no such guarantee on naturalism, the pro-theist might argue, God's existence makes things better in this respect for persons and for the world – and if this respect is significant enough, the pro-theist can argue that God's existence makes person's lives, or the world as a whole, better overall.
- (f) Another common pro-theistic consideration involves the meaning of life. It is sometimes argued that God's existence is necessary for human life to be meaningful.⁴² If true, and if it is a good thing that life can be meaningful, this too could be harnessed in an argument for pro-theism.
- (g) Many expansions of theism include the idea that God ensures an eternal afterlife for all. This might be thought to favour pro-theism. In chapter 4, T.J. Mawson discusses an important supplementary doctrine concerning the afterlife: *universalism*. On this view, not only does everyone receive an eternal afterlife on theism, all persons go to heaven. Given a suitably positive view of heaven, universalism could be harnessed to support pro-theism.

Davis (2014) is a dialogue involving a character, Jill, who is a pro-theist. Jill advances four additional pro-theistic considerations.⁴³

- (h) Better answers to our deepest human questions are possible on theism than on naturalism. (More generally, it is sometimes said that only on theism is the universe fully intelligible.)

- (i) On theism (and not on naturalism), our lives matter in a rich way because God created us and loves us.
- (j) On theism (and not on naturalism) it is possible to be in a relationship with God, and to experience the peace of God's presence, and these are great goods that cannot be obtained on naturalism.
- (k) On theism, our guilt for moral wrongdoing can be forgiven in a richer way than it can be on naturalism.

Anti-theism

The anti-theist thinks that God's existence would or does make things worse than they would otherwise be (again, for some precisification of 'things', 'worse', and 'would otherwise be'). The following anti-theistic considerations are most clearly presented in the work of Guy Kahane (see his 2011 and 2012 papers, and his contribution to this volume). Kahane urges that on theism, but not on naturalism, "we necessarily occupy a subordinate position in relation to a being that is vastly superior to us in every respect" (Chapter 5, page xx). This general point, in his view, has a number of untoward consequences:

- (l) On theism, human beings can never have complete privacy, given God's omniscience – and this is an inherently bad-making feature of the relevant worlds and their inhabitants that does not arise on naturalism.⁴⁴
- (m) On some expansions of theism, God's nature is taken to be incomprehensible, and so on these views, ultimate reality is more inscrutable than it would be on naturalism. (Clearly, this view is in tension with point (h) above.)
- (n) On theism, God is our creator and sustainer, and so we depend upon him for our existence. On naturalism, meanwhile, our existence does not depend upon any extra-mundane person – and this is a better state of affairs.
- (o) On certain expansions of theism, God is taken to have a plan for the cosmos, and purposes for each of us. If this is true, then our ability to live our lives according to our own plans and purposes is significantly impaired in ways that it would not be on naturalism.
- (p) On theism, God's moral status vastly exceeds ours. This grounds various duties in human beings, such as the duty to obey and to worship. Since there is "something deeply undignified in occupying such a subservient position" (Chapter 5, page xx), God's existence reduces the dignity we would otherwise have on naturalism.
- (q) There are individuals whose life plans and projects centrally involve achieving certain sorts of goods, like privacy, knowledge, autonomy, independence, and dignity. Since God's existence would curtail or eliminate these individuals' ability to achieve these life plans and projects, their lives, accordingly, are rendered meaningless on theism but not on naturalism, or are at least rendered significantly less meaningful.⁴⁵

Stephen Maitzen has defended two anti-theistic considerations that can be read as inverting or undermining some of the pro-theistic considerations listed above.

- (r) As we saw in point (c) above, a pro-theist might argue that God's existence anchors morality. But in a 2009 paper, Maitzen argues that theism actually undermines morality. Maitzen focusses on the expansion of theism, mentioned in point (e) above, according to which God ensures that those who experience involuntary undeserved suffering ultimately benefit from this experience. This view, Maitzen says, entails that it's false that we sometimes have a basic obligation to prevent undeserved involuntary human suffering – a consequence he deems absurd and morality-undermining.⁴⁶
- (s) In chapter 6 in this volume, Maitzen argues that theism – far from making reality intelligible, as mentioned in point (h) – in fact compromises our capacity to understand the universe. While Kahane focusses on the unknowability of God – see point (m) above – Maitzen urges that the universe is fundamentally mysterious on theism in a way that it is not on naturalism.

Erik Wielenberg has also defended anti-theistic considerations that can also be read as inverting or undermining some of the pro-theistic considerations above.

- (t) Wielenberg (2005) imagines a mother who sacrifices her own life so that her child can live. If God guarantees ultimate cosmic justice, as theists sometimes suppose, then this mother's actions will, ultimately, be rewarded. But on naturalism there is no such guarantee – and, accordingly, the truth of naturalism makes possible acts of true self-sacrifice in a way that theism does not. While cosmic justice appeared in the list of pro-theistic considerations – point (b) above – Wielenberg's argument here seeks to identify an anti-theistic drawback of this very feature.
- (u) In chapter 7 of this volume, Wielenberg argues that the truth of Christian theism would render human life absurd in a very specific way: human beings who see what Christianity requires would experience negative psychological consequences that would make it difficult or impossible for them to be happy. Wielenberg argues that on Christianity, we have a moral obligation to pursue the good of others. But the Christian God would also ensure that every instance of involuntary undeserved suffering ultimately makes the sufferer better off than she would otherwise have been. Accordingly, on Christianity, we have an obligation to inflict undeserved and involuntary suffering on others – and realizing this suffices to make life absurd in Wielenberg's sense. This can be seen as inverting or undermining point (e), above, and as an extension of Maitzen's argument mentioned in point (r) above.

4. Connections between the Existential and the Axiological Issues

As visually depicted in the tables above, the axiological issues are orthogonal to the existential question of whether God exists. It might seem, accordingly, that they are entirely independent. But this has been contested in several intriguing ways.

1. In their contributions to this volume, Michael Tooley and J.L. Schellenberg both argue that the anti-theist must, in order to be consistent, be an atheist. Tooley argues that if (wide) anti-theism is true, then it is better to bring about a world in which God does not exist. An omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being would unerringly bring about the better in lieu of the worse. And so, if such a being were to exist at any time, that being would ensure that no such being exists at some future time. But, since Tooley thinks that if God exists, then God exists at all times, it follows that if there is *any* time at which God does not exist, then God

simply does not exist. (And, alternatively, if there is *no* time at which God exists, God doesn't exist either.) Accordingly, Tooley thinks, anti-theism entails atheism. For his part, Schellenberg thinks that any argument for the claim that there is a genuinely worse-making feature of theism simply amounts to an argument for atheism. This is because he holds that any being worthy of the name 'God' could not possibly bring about any worse-making feature whatsoever.

2. Another connection between the existential and axiological issues is brought out in the chapter by Myron A. Penner and Ben Arbour in this volume. They argue that proponents of certain arguments for atheism that appeal to evil are rationally required to be pro-theists. Such arguments, they say, essentially involve the following claim: "If God were to exist in a world, some possible really bad feature would be precluded from that world". This consideration constitutes one respect in which things would be better on theism, and so it is tantamount to a narrow form of pro-theism. They go on to argue that this consideration is weighty enough to justify wide pro-theism as well.
3. Travis Dumsday (2016) draws a connection between arguments for atheism that appeal to non-resistant non-belief and a certain form of anti-theism. On certain expansions of theism, it is possible that persons will justly face harsh postmortem punishment for their misdeeds. This feature constitutes one respect in which people's lives would be worse if such an expansion of theism is true, as noted above in section 3, point (b). Yet, while this thought supports narrow personal anti-theism, Dumsday argues, it also furnishes a response to arguments from non-resistant non-belief. It's reasonable to suppose that God might 'hide' – that is, might permit non-resistant non-belief in his existence – in order to mercifully spare at least some of us from awareness of our impending and just post-mortem fate. If this is right, Dumsday argues, then the occurrence of non-resistant non-belief does not decisively count against the truth of theism, contrary to what philosophers like Schellenberg have held.
4. In chapter 11, Richard Davis and Paul Franks draw a specific connection between the existential and axiological issues within the philosophy of Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga famously constructed a 'defence' against the logical problem of evil: a logically possible explanation of why God *might* permit evil to occur. In his more recent work, however, Plantinga has also offered a 'theodicy': a purported account of God's *actual* reasons for permitting evil. This theodicy is unabashedly pro-theistic: it involves the claim that God's existence ensures that things will be far better than they would otherwise be. Yet, by focusing on the case of Jesus, Davis and Franks argue that Plantinga's defence is incompatible with his theodicy.
5. In a forthcoming paper, Daniel Linford and Jason Megill draw a very different connection between the existential and axiological issues. They describe several biases that plague our thinking (wishful thinking, valence effect, and the optimism bias), and point out that: "Common among these biases is the overestimation of the probability that a belief is true precisely because individuals associate positive outcomes with the truth of the belief" (13). If this is correct, then pro-theists are susceptible to over-valuing the probative force of the arguments and evidence *for* God's existence – and, likewise, anti-theists are susceptible to over-valuing the probative force of the arguments and evidence *against* God's existence.⁴⁷ Accordingly, those investigating the arguments and evidence for and against theism should carefully and conscientiously work to mitigate the effects of these biases.

5. The Debate about Rational Preferences

In an oft-quoted passage, Thomas Nagel remarks: “I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope that I’m right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that” (1997, 131). For ease of exposition, I will gather together sentiments like hopes, wishes, and desires under the heading ‘preferences’. So construed, Nagel here expresses a clear preference for God’s non-existence. Some authors have explored the issue of which preferences in this domain can plausibly be deemed rational. Suppose one holds that preferences can be rational *only if* they track reasonable axiological judgements. On this view, for example, one can rationally prefer God’s non-existence only if one also takes it that things would be better without God than they would otherwise be (for some precisification of ‘things’, ‘better’, and ‘would otherwise be’). If this is right, then there is no separate issue about which preferences are rational in this domain – the discussion simply collapses into the debate about axiology discussed above.

But some authors have cautioned that it can be rational, in certain cases, to prefer the worse to the better.⁴⁸ If this is possible here, then the debate about rational preference is, after all, distinct from the axiological discussion. This will require some modification to the positions on the horizontal axis of our earlier tables. If the debate is construed to concern which preferences are rational, then the resulting positions (moving from right to left) are as follows. The *quietist* holds that, in principle, no plausible account can be given about which preferences are reasonable in this domain. The *agnostic* demurs, thinking that, at least in principle, some preferences could be deemed reasonable. (The *positive* agnostic holds that, at present, there is insufficient evidence and arguments to justify any preference. And the *withholding* agnostic simply withholds judgment, even about the statement ‘agnosticism about which preferences concerning God’s (non)existence are reasonable is the most defensible position’.) We saw earlier that the *neutralist* holds that God’s existence neither makes things better than, nor worse than, they would otherwise be. The corresponding position about rational preference is perhaps better termed *indifferentism*, and it is the view of one who thinks that, in practice, God’s existence can neither be rationally preferred nor dispreferred, and that, accordingly, the rational attitude to take is indifference. The anti-theist, of course, thinks that it is rational to prefer God’s non-existence, and the pro-theist thinks that it is rational to prefer God’s existence.

		PREFERENCES				
		<i>Pro-Theism</i>	<i>Anti-Theism</i>	Indifferentism	Agnosticism	Quietism
EXISTENTIAL POSITIONS	Theism					
	Atheism					
	Agnosticism					

The distinctions between *wide* and *narrow*, and between *personal* and *impersonal*, variants of the axiological positions can be applied here as well, thus generating sixty combinations of positions – combinations of a position on whether God exists with a view about rational preferences in this domain.

The clarificatory points about the axiological positions made in Section 1, above, can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to the preference-based construal of this debate. But there are some important differences to consider. For example, suppose one thinks that comparative axiological judgments are simply impossible, on the grounds that theism, if true, is necessarily true, and that, accordingly, no sense can be made of the comparative axiological question. Such a person would, of course, be a quietist about the axiological issue. But this needn’t commit such an individual to

quietism about rational preferences. Stephen Davis offers a helpful example to illustrate this idea. While it is logically impossible for the laws of mathematics to be other than what they are, it is not clear that it is therefore irrational for the struggling math student to wish, *per impossibile*, that calculus were easier than it is.⁴⁹

6. Chapter Summaries

Chapters 2-4 develop and defend arguments for pro-theism. Chapters 5-8 develop and defend arguments for anti-theism. Finally, chapters 9-11 explore connections between the existential and axiological issues.⁵⁰

In **chapter 2, Scott A. Davison** sets the stage by rehearsing his favoured account of intrinsic value. According to Davison, the intrinsic properties of a thing are those that it possesses by itself, quite apart from any relationships to other things. The intrinsic properties of a thing ground its powers, capacities, and dispositions, and these typically distinguish a thing from other things. According to Davison, for X to be intrinsically valuable, X must have an intrinsic structure that would provide a fully informed, properly functioning valuer with a reason to value X for its own sake. Armed with this conceptual framework, Davison offers an argument for a limited form of pro-theism. He notes that if God were to exist, God would possess intrinsically a significant combination of great-making features (and perhaps even the best possible combination) to the highest possible degree. Moreover, God would be a fully informed, properly functioning valuer. Given his definition of intrinsic value, then, it follows that God would possess intrinsic value to a significant degree (perhaps even the highest possible degree). The result, says Davison, favours pro-theism, since worlds containing God would contain a significant amount of intrinsic value, whereas other worlds would contain nothing that possesses anything like this degree of intrinsic value.

In **chapter 3, Michael Tooley** offers three main arguments. First, he urges that the axiological and existential questions concerning God's existence are not logically independent, since anti-theism entails atheism. Second, he defends impersonal pro-theism, and third, he indirectly defends personal pro-theism (by criticizing arguments for anti-theism).⁵¹ Tooley's first argument begins by supposing that wide, impersonal anti-theism is true, and that God should be understood as an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect good being who exists at every time. He argues that, given anti-theism, it is better to bring about a world in which God does not exist than to refrain from doing so. An omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect being would, of necessity, choose the better action over the worse, when both are available.⁵² So, if such a being exists at any time, it would bring it about that God does not exist at some future time. And bringing this about, Tooley argues, would be within its power.⁵³ If there is any time at which God does not exist, then God does not exist, given Tooley's definition of God noted above. So, if an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being were to exist at any time, given wide anti-theism, atheism is true. And, equally, if an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being were to exist at no time whatsoever, atheism is true. Since these alternatives are exclusive and exhaustive, anti-theism entails atheism.⁵⁴

Tooley's second main argument is a defence of impersonal pro-theism. He offers two pro-theistic considerations: eternal life for human beings and the idea that justice will be achieved in the end. Both will plausibly occur on theism, Tooley thinks, but not on atheism – and both are very important good-making features of worlds. Tooley argues that the case for pro-theism is much stronger on atheism than it is on theism. One important reason is that the atheist, unlike the theist, can hold that all the suffering due to natural and moral evil that we find in the actual world either would not (or likely would not) obtain on theism.⁵⁵

Finally, Tooley criticizes arguments for personal anti-theism, including those of Kahane (2011). The basic structure of Tooley's criticism is this: for any putative personally worse-making

consequence of God's existence to which the anti-theist appeals, careful reflection on the nature of an unsurpassable being will reveal that it is not a consequence of God's existence at all.⁵⁶ For example: whereas Kahane argued that God's omniscience would objectionably violate human being's privacy, leading some people's lives to be personally worse under theism than they would be on naturalism, Tooley counters that an omnipotent, perfectly good being would be extremely unlikely to be omniscient, on the grounds that it is very likely morally wrong, on at least some occasions, to access the thoughts and feelings of a person without his or her consent. Tooley thinks that similar moves could be made with respect to any other anti-theistic considerations. According to Tooley, the inclination to see personal downsides of God's existence (as opposed to revising one's concept of God such that these downsides do not obtain) is due to the inordinate conceptual influence of the major monotheistic religions, and, correspondingly, inadequate attention to what should really be expected of an omnipotent, perfectly good being.⁵⁷

In **chapter 4, T.J. Mawson** seeks an answer to the axiological question on which theists and atheists can agree, even if the debate about whether God exists has not been settled. He proposes the following method, which he first advanced in an earlier paper (Mawson 2012). The theist and the atheist should each begin with the actual world as they take it to be, and should then search for the nearest comparator world in which the rival view is true. Since both take their own view to be metaphysically necessary, both will have to exercise their imaginations to travel 'outward' through modal space, past all the metaphysically possible worlds, and then into the merely logically possible worlds.⁵⁸ Having arrived there, so to speak, each should inspect candidates for the closest world to the actual world (as they take it to be), and then engage in – admittedly speculative – comparative evaluation. Mawson first considers the matter from the theist's perspective. As Mawson sees it, the theist has three defensible candidates for which world is the closest to (what she takes to be) the actual world. First, she might say that if God does not exist, nothing else does either, so the closest world may fairly be called Nothingness. This world, Mawson urges, is impersonally worse, since it lacks God. Moreover, he suggests, Nothingness cannot be personally worse for anyone, since it evidently contains no persons. Second, the theist might hold that the nearest logically possible world lacking God contains a simulacrum of the actual world, alike in all respects save those involving God's existence and activity. This world, says Mawson, is impersonally worse – again since it lacks God – and personally worse too, since the theists in it mistakenly worship a non-existent deity.⁵⁹ Third, the theist might hold that the nearest possible world lacking God contains not only a simulacrum of everything non-divine in the actual world, but also a being who is as similar as possible to God without being God, and who plays the same roles in that world that God does (according to theists) in the actual world. Mawson urges that such a world would be impersonally worse, since the deity it contains is inferior to God. Moreover, such a world would be personally worse for theists, since they would inadvertently be worshipping this inferior deity instead of God.

Mawson then considers the matter from the atheist's perspective, by exploring two candidates for the nearest logically possible world in which theism is true. The first contains a simulacrum of the actual world as the atheist takes it to be, and in addition contains God. This world, Mawson says, is impersonally better in virtue of containing God. Moreover, Mawson says, atheists should agree that it is personally better for all, since theism logically entails universalism – the view that all persons ultimately enjoy a heavenly afterlife.⁶⁰ The other candidate world that Mawson considers contains God but no creation at all. He urges that atheists should hold that it is impersonally better than the actual world as they take it to be, since God is such a superlative being. Moreover, Mawson notes that atheists should hold that such a world cannot be personally better for any creatures, since it evidently doesn't contain any. Mawson's official conclusion, then, is that until the debate about whether God exists is resolved, theists and atheists can agree on a view he calls *weak pro-theism*. The theist should hold that it would be somewhat worse (or at least no better) if atheism were true, and the atheist should hold that it would be somewhat better (or at least no worse) if theism were true.

In **chapter 5, Guy Kahane** develops and defends a novel argument for the anti-theistic claim that the worlds we should most prefer are ones in which God does not exist. Kahane concedes that God's existence would make things better in various important respects. He has in mind the sort of consideration typically appealed to by pro-theists, such as the idea that theism ensures cosmic justice and eternal afterlives for everyone. But he cautions that these goods can be obtained without theism. Karma, for example, could secure cosmic justice, and afterlives (or at any rate, immortality) could likewise be guaranteed by various non-naturalistic non-theistic systems. Moreover, Kahane argues at length that theism would make things worse in other important respects. In so doing, he develops in greater detail some of the considerations initially set out in Kahane 2011: God's existence, he says, would violate our privacy, compromise our autonomy, and make us objectionably dependent.⁶¹ Given these considerations, Kahane concludes that there are possible atheistic worlds that offer all (or at least most) of the benefits of God's existence but without these serious costs. From this he infers that some atheist worlds are either the best or at least among the best, and are at any rate superior to all theist alternatives. And this, he says, justifies his overall conclusion about which worlds are preferable. Kahane takes pains to argue that, if his argument is successful, even theists should prefer God's non-existence. Along the way, Kahane responds to criticisms of his earlier argument for anti-theism.

In **chapter 6, Stephen Maitzen** considers the relationship between, on the one hand, the truth of supernaturalism in general (and theism in particular) and, on the other hand, the intelligibility of the universe. The first half of his chapter consists in criticizing arguments for the claim that the intelligibility of the universe requires theism. One such argument invokes God to explain the laws of logic. Maitzen points out that this argument requires the claim if God did not exist, the laws of logic would not hold – and he notes that the consequent of this conditional is senseless, since the laws of logic are necessary in the strongest sense. Another argument maintains that our cognitive equipment is reliable if and only if God exists. While Descartes famously held that God could not deceive, Maitzen demurs, and he thus objects that God's existence would not suffice for the reliability of our cognitive equipment. A third argument holds that knowledge can occur only if God exists. Maitzen responds by saying that this argument illicitly requires that knowledge is infallible. In the second half of his chapter, Maitzen argues that supernaturalism in general (and theism in particular) seriously compromises humanity's capacity to understand the universe.⁶² Maitzen defines naturalism to be the view that purposes aren't fundamental: every being, action, or whatever, that has a purpose (a goal, a telos) ultimately arises from things that have no purpose. In slogan form: "Purposes don't go all the way down" (Chapter 6, page xx). He argues that this view is incompatible with many supernaturalistic views, including theism. While naturalism allows human discovery to be limitless in depth, theism holds that something magical stands at the foundation of our universe: a purposive being whose aims cannot be understood by our scientific method. Maitzen concedes that, given theism, we should still ask indefinitely many *nonscientific* questions about God, but he urges that the growth in our knowledge of the natural world over the past few centuries vastly outstrips the growth in our knowledge of God – and this is not the sort of asymmetry we should expect if inquiry into the nature of God were a promising line of research. Maitzen closes by briefly developing further related anti-theistic considerations: if God exists, he argues, the universe is perversely unpredictable, frustrating, and scary.

In **chapter 7, Eric Wielenberg** turns his attention to Christian theism. He argues that the existence of the Christian God would make life absurd in a very specific way.⁶³ According to Wielenberg, the God of Christianity is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect, triune, and has commanded us to love him with all our hearts and to love our neighbours as ourselves. The final clause is the main focus of his paper. Wielenberg offers the following definition of the expression *claim C makes life absurd*: "Claim C's truth makes (or would make) true at least one claim C1 such that most (actual) human beings are such that if they were to accept C1 they would experience negative psychological consequences that would make it difficult or impossible for them to be happy (without also failing to accept at least one entailment of C)" (Chapter 6, page

xx). Wielenberg takes for granted that a morally perfect God would not permit the occurrence of any gratuitous evil, and, moreover, that such a being would ensure that every instance of involuntary and undeserved suffering ultimately makes the individual who experiences it better off overall than she would otherwise have been. A consequence of this view is that whenever A inflicts involuntary undeserved suffering on B, B is ultimately better off than she would otherwise have been. Moreover, since the Christian God requires us to love our neighbours as ourselves, and since this involves pursuing the good of others, it seems that, if Christianity is true, we have a moral obligation to inflict involuntary and undeserved suffering on others. Realizing this appalling truth would cause most human beings to experience negative psychological consequences that would make it difficult or impossible for them to be happy, and so, by Wielenberg's definition of absurdity, such individuals' lives would be rendered absurd once they understood this. Wielenberg argues that these negative psychological consequences would occur whether or not people acted upon their moral obligation to inflict involuntary and undeserved suffering. After considering and rejecting some objections, Wielenberg connects his argument to the axiology of theism. He expresses doubt that either wide impersonal or wide personal anti-theism can be established. In the former case, this is because (a) God's existence itself would add great value to the world, and because (b) God's preventing all gratuitous evil would ensure that the absurdity appealed to in Wielenberg's own argument could not possibly make the world worse overall than it would otherwise be. In the latter case, this is because God would ensure that the negative psychological consequences (which, after all, are involuntary and undeserved) ultimately benefit those who suffer them. Wielenberg instead defends the claim that, given his central argument, it is reasonable to prefer, or desire, or hope, that atheism is true – even if theism would make things better overall than they would otherwise be, both for the world as a whole and the individuals in it. This idea is explored in greater detail in the subsequent chapter.

In **chapter 8, Toby Betenson** develops and defends a new construal of anti-theism. He begins by noting that anti-theism is often taken to hold that one can reasonably prefer the non-existence of God *only if* God's existence would make the world worse than it would otherwise be. Critics of anti-theism typically deny that this necessary condition is satisfied, and Betenson accepts that their arguments are entirely persuasive. (This is because Betenson, like Wielenberg, holds that if God were to exist, then God – a supremely powerful, knowledgeable, and loving being – would ensure that any 'downsides' of his existence would be used to bring about greater goods, and that this would ensure that the world is not worse than it would otherwise be.) But Betenson argues that this condition is not necessary at all: it can be reasonable to prefer God's non-existence even while conceding that God's existence fails to make things worse, and indeed even makes things better. He offers several analogies in support of this claim. One can rationally accept that the presence of security measures at airports makes the world better than it would otherwise be, and that the taking of painful medication makes one's life better than it would otherwise be, while nevertheless rationally preferring that the world not be such that these measures or medicines are necessary. Likewise, he urges, one can accept that God's existence makes things better, while rationally preferring that God not exist. In the final, more speculative, section of his paper, he argues that such preferences might even be appropriate and meaningful even if they are not, strictly speaking, rational.

In **chapter 9, J.L. Schellenberg** carefully considers the relationship between anti-theism and atheism. He begins by claiming that the property of God-ness must realize three forms of transcendence: metaphysical, axiological, and soteriological. When these forms of transcendence are maximally instantiated, the resulting divine reality must be deemed *triple ultimate*: it is the ultimate fact, it has the ultimate worth, and makes for the ultimate good of creatures and the world. On this account of God-ness, Schellenberg argues, God's existence simply could not make a world or this world or someone's world – the world of someone's personal experience – worse than it would be if naturalism were true. So pro-theism initially seems secure. If the anti-theist were to insist that some property of God *would* make the world worse in some

way, Schellenberg replies that the very fact that such a property is worse-making is sufficient reason for thinking that it shouldn't be attributed to God in the first place.⁶⁴ But suppose that this move fails, and that the relevant property should indeed be ascribed to God. In this case, Schellenberg argues, defenders of theism will need to argue that it is not really worse-making after all. If this move also fails, then the result is that anti-theistic considerations collapse into arguments for atheism: any genuinely worse-making feature of God's existence simply shows that, given the requirements of triple ultimacy, God does not exist.⁶⁵ Schellenberg then considers whether such arguments would constitute a new kind of argument for atheism, or whether they would simply fall under the heading 'problem of evil'. He suggests that they would properly be treated as distinct from arguments from evil – since they would concern ineluctable features of God's existence that occur in *every* world in which God exists, whereas arguments from evil always involve contingent claims about events or circumstances in the actual world. But, Schellenberg notes, typical anti-theistic considerations (about God's existence compromising privacy, meaning, independence, or autonomy in human life) won't be relevant in *all* theistic worlds – since of course God needn't create beings whose privacy, meaning, independence, or autonomy would be compromised by his existence. And so Schellenberg doubts that such arguments could, strictly speaking, constitute a new route to atheism, independent of the problem of evil. In closing, however, Schellenberg suggests that there is nevertheless a way to understand anti-theism as part of a broad new strategy for supporting atheism. He claims that recent insights about cultural evolution have suggested new ways to criticize theism. For instance, consider his own prominent 'argument from non-resistant non-belief'. This argument centrally appeals to the idea that a perfectly loving God would seek ongoing intimate personal relationships with all creatures who are capable of it. Schellenberg thinks that this is a new, more culturally evolved, way of understanding the divine character – one that blinkered adherence to tradition can easily suppress. Evidently, this argument turns on a *pro*-theistic consideration: the goodness of intimate, personal relationships between creature and created that would be sought by God. But, he suggests, the considerations typically invoked by *anti*-theists also invoke values made more prominent by cultural evolution: privacy, meaning, autonomy, and independence. To the extent that these considerations ultimately support atheism, they are indeed part of this new approach, even if they can legitimately be classified as arguments from evil.

In **chapter 10, Myron A. Penner and Ben Arbour** argue that proponents of certain arguments from evil are rationally required to be pro-theists. They begin by noting that some prominent arguments from evil are committed to the following auxiliary assumption: "If God were to exist in a world, some possible really bad feature would be precluded from that world" (**Chapter 10, page xx**). For example, the logical argument from evil maintains that if God were to exist, there would be no evil at all to be observed, and the evidential argument from evil holds that if God were to exist, there would be no gratuitous evil to be observed. Since proponents of these arguments are committed to the idea that God's existence would prevent certain really bad features from occurring, they are committed to the idea that God's existence would make the world better than it would otherwise be in these respects. Thus far, then, such individuals are committed to *narrow* pro-theism. But must they be *wide* pro-theists? Perhaps not, one might say. After all, anti-theists have argued that God's existence would entail the occurrence of *other* really bad features that might outweigh the positive effects of God's preventing the really bad features already considered. Penner and Arbour think that the prospects for such a move are dim indeed. They consider the putative negative consequences of God's existence that anti-theists have considered (loss of privacy, loss of autonomy, loss of understanding, and the inability to pursue a meaningful life) and they argue that it is deeply implausible to think that such features – even if they are uniformly bad-making – can outweigh the value added to a world by God's precluding the really bad features appealed to in arguments from evil. So, they conclude, defenders of these arguments from evil are rationally required to be wide pro-theists.⁶⁶

In **chapter 11, Richard Davis and W. Paul Franks** consider the relationship between two different responses that Alvin Plantinga has offered to the problem of evil – and argue that they cannot both succeed. In response to the logical problem of evil, Plantinga speculated that all creaturely essences suffer from a condition called ‘transworld depravity’. This condition guarantees that any world that God actualizes, if it includes free creatures, will also include moral evil. The possibility that all creaturely essences suffer from this condition is essential for the success of Plantinga’s *defence* against the logical problem of evil. According to Plantinga, a defence is a logically possible explanation of why God might permit moral evil. God, Plantinga thinks, has morally justifying reasons for instantiating creaturely essences, and so, since it is logically possible that all creatures suffer from transworld depravity, it is logically possible that God has morally justifying reasons for permitting moral evil. Plantinga’s argument is not without its critics, but it has been widely accepted. Independently, Plantinga has also offered a *theodicy* – a purported account of God’s actual reasons for permitting evil. Here, Plantinga argues that God will choose one of the best possible worlds to actualize – and that any such world will include the Incarnation and the Atonement. (Plantinga is thus a *pro*-theist: he holds that God’s existence ensures that things will be far better than they would otherwise be.) Now, since the Atonement logically requires the occurrence of moral evil – otherwise there would be nothing to atone – we have an account of why God permits it to occur: moral evil is an ineluctable feature of the best possible worlds. Davis and Franks seek to show that if Plantinga’s defence succeeds, his theodicy fails. They do this by focusing on the essence of Jesus Christ. According to standard Christian doctrine, Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, God Incarnate, and the one who brings about our atonement for sin. Davis and Franks argue that if Plantinga is right that all creaturely essences suffer from transworld depravity, then Jesus’ essence must so suffer as well. But if so, then it must be the case that in any world in which Jesus’ essence is instantiated, Jesus will, in fact, go morally wrong at least once. And this is a big problem for the doctrine of the Atonement, since Christian orthodoxy takes for granted that only a sinless agent can bring this about. Accordingly, Davis and Franks claim, if Plantinga’s celebrated defence succeeds, his pro-theistic theodicy fails.

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Notes

¹ Although some themes from this discussion are present in Rescher (1990), the contemporary literature on this topic began with Guy Kahane's very important and influential 2011 paper, entitled "Should We Want God to Exist?"

² Some theists have also held that God is responsible for the existence of non-contingent entities as well. For more on this issue, see Gould (2014).

³ For discussions of other models of God that have been discussed by analytic philosophers, see Diller and Kasher (2013) and Nagasawa and Buckareff (2016).

⁴ This way of framing the question evidently presumes that possible worlds can sensibly be thought to have an overall axiological status. While this has been contested (e.g. Thompson 2008), it is widely granted in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, and indeed by the contributors to this debate. For more on the standard assumptions about possible worlds and their value in analytic philosophy of religion, see Kraay (2008).

⁵ See Kraay and Dragos (2013, 162).

⁶ Peter van Inwagen's (1998) modal skepticism offers some important reasons for thinking that we are just not up to the job.

⁷ This issue is discussed in Kahane (2011), and in Kahane's and Tooley's chapters in this volume, and in Mawson (forthcoming).

⁸ In chapter 5, Kahane points out there are many different variants of naturalism to consider as well.

⁹ Davis and Franks (2015) propose a novel semantics informed by the *null world* hypothesis – the idea that if God doesn't exist, nothing else does either. On this view, all counterpossibles involving the non-existence of God turn out to be false. As Mugg (2016) points out, this move also threatens the intelligibility of many comparative judgments at issue in the debate about the axiology of theism, and so, whatever its merits, it will not suffice if the goal is to avoid quietism about the axiology of theism. For more on this issue, see Kahane (2012, 36-7).

¹⁰ Kahane (2012) and Mugg (2016) also discuss philosophical disputes outside the philosophy of religion in which each side takes the other's view to be impossible. Kahane discusses libertarianism versus compatibilism in the debate about free will, and Mugg discusses presentism versus eternalism in the philosophy of time.

¹¹ Guy Kahane raised this point in personal correspondence.

¹² On this point, see T.J. Mawson's chapter in this volume.

¹³ On this point, see Mugg (2016).

¹⁴ Moser (2013) agrees, and so does Tooley, in his chapter in this volume.

¹⁵ More precisely: "...for any possible world *W*, the book on *W* is the set *S* of propositions such that *p* is a member of *S* if *W* entails *p*. Like worlds, books too have a maximality property; if *B* is a book, then for any proposition *p*, either *p* is a member of *B* or else not-*p* is" (Plantinga 1974, 46).

¹⁶ And as a result, the revised book might not represent a genuine possibility.

¹⁷ For discussions of this issue, see Kahane (2017), and the chapters by Mawson and Kahane in this volume.

¹⁸ While *divinely ordained* purposes cannot be present on naturalism, it might nevertheless be the case that the world or its inhabitants have been created with *non-divinely-ordained* purposes on naturalism. (Consider, for example, the idea that we are living in a simulation created by super-intelligent aliens.) I owe this point to Guy Kahane.

¹⁹ T.J. Mawson discusses this issue in chapter 4.

²⁰ This is the dominant view in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, but there have been some important dissenters. For details, see Kraay (2016a and 2016b).

²¹ For discussions of this point, see Kahane (2011, note 11) and Michael Tooley's chapter in this volume.

²² Here I have in mind the argument, championed by J.L. Schellenberg, that has come to be known as the argument from divine hiddenness. See, for example, Schellenberg (1993).

²³ It's not the case that *all* such differences are relevant to this axiological inquiry: it is the changes due to God's existence (or non-existence) that are germane. On this point, see Kraay and Dragos (2011, 161-2).

²⁴ Sticking with Plantinga's metaphor, we might think of features or proper parts of worlds as 'chapters' of books. And my point is just removing God from a chapter (or adding God to a chapter) may have many effects on that chapter.

²⁵ To bring out the difference between personal and impersonal approaches, Mawson (2012) offers the vivid example of a meteorite striking and killing a relatively unimportant person. While this event may have only negligible *impersonal* significance in the grand scheme of things, or for the world as a whole, it clearly has enormous *personal* significance for the victim.

²⁶ Scott Davison touches on this issue in chapter 2, section 3.

²⁷ Moral nihilists, of course, demur.

²⁸ For more on sin in this context, see Davis (2014, 152-4).

²⁹ Contrariwise, someone might hold that otherwise indistinguishable morally good actions are *better* on naturalism than they are on theism. See section 3, point (t), below.

³⁰ I should note that Kraay and Dragos (2013) followed Kahane (2011) in construing anti-theism as the view that God's existence makes things *far* worse (and in construing pro-theism as the view that God's existence makes things *far* better). Under pressure from Moser (2013), I here omit the modifier 'far'.

³¹ This term is due to Mawson (chapter 4 in this volume). Kraay and Dragos (2013) use the term 'indifferentism' instead, but, on reflection, it is best avoided here, since it connotes a lack of preferences rather than an axiological judgment.

³² The application of this term in this context is due to Mugg (2016).

³³ One might of course make the same distinction with respect to agnosticism about the existential question. I thank Nathan Ballantyne for clarifying this distinction for me.

³⁴ I will return to this in Section 4, below.

³⁵ A robust defence of this view would presumably provide reasons why none of the proposed solutions to this problem are viable.

³⁶ For a discussion of apatheism, see Hedberg and Huzarevich (2017).

³⁷ Whether this counts as an expansion of bare theism depends on whether it is a logical consequence of the attributes listed under 'bare theism'. I concentrate on the attribute 'unsurpassable' rather than the more familiar 'greatest conceivable' in order to circumvent worries about whether conceivability tracks possibility.

³⁸ Arguments in this vein are advanced by Davison (in chapter 2) and by Penner and Lougheed (2015).

³⁹ This line of thought evidently presumes that no purely naturalistic mechanism could guarantee cosmic justice. But this might be contested: suppose, for example, that our universe was created and sustained by very advanced, powerful, and benevolent aliens who take it upon themselves to ensure that we humans all eventually get our just deserts. One might think that, relative to this alternative, and in this respect, God's existence cannot make things better than they would otherwise be. Here and in what follows, I bracket this type of consideration, by stipulating that the naturalistic alternatives to theism at issue do not contain mechanisms that play the same role as God is thought to play on theism. But for more on this issue, see Kahane's chapter in this volume.

⁴⁰ Of course, as T.J. Mawson has pointed out in correspondence, if one thinks that without God, there would be no value whatsoever, then one cannot sensibly be a pro-theist. One would have to hold that value is independent of God, but that morality depends upon God.

⁴¹ See, for example, Stump (1990), Tooley (1991), and Rowe (1996).

⁴² A wonderful entry point to this literature is Seachris (2012). For a detailed treatment, see Mawson (2016).

⁴³ They are expressed as preferences, not as axiological judgments, but Davis appears to presume that the former track the latter.

⁴⁴ Of course – and here I echo a point made in note 39 – there could be versions of naturalism on which human beings cannot have complete privacy either. Suppose, for example, that we are really just characters in a simulation designed by intelligent aliens, and that our thoughts are perfectly transparent to them. One might think that, relative to this alternative, and in this respect, God's existence cannot make things worse than they would otherwise be. Here and in what follows, I bracket this type of consideration, by stipulating that the naturalistic alternatives to theism at issue do not contain mechanisms that play the same role as God is thought to play on theism.

⁴⁵ Penner (2015) criticizes this argument. Lougheed (forthcoming) responds.

⁴⁶ Related moves are made in Hasker (1992, 2004, 2008) and Jordan (2004). But Hasker and Jordan aim to convince theists to give up the expansion of theism at issue, whereas Maitzen argues that theism, so construed, undermines ordinary morality.

⁴⁷ Nagel agrees: "[I]t is just as irrational to be influenced in one's beliefs by the hope that God does not exist as by the hope that God does exist" (1997, 131). See also Kahane (2012, 31-32).

⁴⁸ Several versions of this view are sympathetically discussed in Kahane (2011), Luck and Ellerby (2012), and in Erik Wielenberg's and Toby Betenson's chapters in this volume. McLean (2015) responds to Luck and Ellerby (2012).

⁴⁹ That wish *could be* construed as a wish for enhanced cognitive power, but I take it that Davis' point is that it needn't be.

⁵⁰ Michael Tooley's chapter not only defends pro-theism, it also explores the connections between the axiological and existential issues, and so it might have been placed in the final section of this anthology.

⁵¹ Strictly speaking, Tooley only argues that there is no respect in which the world would be better if God did not exist. This is, of course, compatible with views other than pro-theism, including the view that God's existence makes no difference to the overall value of a world.

⁵² Tooley makes an exception to this principle for cases in which the alternatives are situated in an infinite hierarchy of increasingly-better actions – but he thinks that this is not such a case.

⁵³ Tooley recognizes that this claim is controversial, given that God is often taken to be a necessary being. But he argues that God should not be understood to exist of logical necessity.

⁵⁴ Schellenberg also argues that anti-theism entails atheism in chapter 9.

⁵⁵ Penner and Arbour endorse a similar argument in chapter 10.

⁵⁶ Schellenberg endorses a similar argument in chapter 9.

⁵⁷ Schellenberg exhibits a similar sentiment in chapter 9, and Kahane replies in chapter 5.

⁵⁸ Thus Mawson agrees with Tooley that God needn't be regarded as a logically necessary being.

⁵⁹ While Mawson thinks of worship as an appropriate response to God, in chapter 3, Tooley suggests that no being should be deemed worthy of worship.

⁶⁰ He argues for this entailment in Mawson (2005).

⁶¹ For dissenting views, see the chapters by Tooley and Schellenberg, both of which argue that a truly appropriate conception of God could not plausibly be thought to have these axiological downsides. Kahane's chapter responds to these concerns.

⁶² Kahane (2011) gestures at such an anti-theistic consideration, but Maitzen develops it in greater detail.

⁶³ Kahane (2011) also argues that on theism, certain people's lives are absurd, but for different reasons: Kahane focusses on those whose life plans and projects are rendered unachievable by God's existence, arguing that such people's lives are meaningless, and hence absurd.

⁶⁴ Michael Tooley endorses a related argument in chapter 3.

⁶⁵ Michael Tooley endorses a similar argument in chapter 3.

⁶⁶ It's important to see the difference between Penner and Arbour's argument here and the argument that Betenson endorses in section 1 of chapter 8: while Penner and Arbour maintain that the putative 'downsides' of God's existence cannot outweigh the upsides of God's existence, Betenson argues that God would ensure that any downsides of his existence would *themselves* be used to bring about greater goods.