

# PRO-THEISM AND THE ADDED VALUE OF MORALLY GOOD AGENTS

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This is a pre-print copy of a paper set to appear in *Philosophia Christi* Vol. 17, No. 1 (Summer 2015).

## Abstract

Pro-theism is the view that God's existence would be good in that God's existence increases the value of a world. Anti-theism is the view that God's existence would decrease the value of a world. We develop and defend the Morally Good Agent Argument for pro-theism. The basic idea is that morally good agents tend to add value to states of affairs, and God, moral agent par excellence is no exception. Thus, we argue that the existence of God would be, on balance, a good thing and therefore something that one can rationally desire to be true.

## Introduction

In this paper, we develop and defend the Morally Good Agent Argument for pro-theism. Following Richard Swinburne, we identify theism as the claim that “there exists necessarily a person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who necessarily is eternal, perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and the creator of all things.”<sup>1</sup> Regardless of one's perspective on whether theism can be rational, one still can ask the following question: would God's existence be a good thing?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>2</sup> A number of recent papers address pro-theism and anti-theism: see Richard Brian Davis and W. Paul Franks, “Counterpossibles and the 'Terrible' Divine Command Deity.” *Religious Studies* (forthcoming); Guy Kahane, “Should We Want God to Exist?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 82 (2011): 674-696; Guy Kahane, “The Value Question in Metaphysics,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85 (2012): 27-55; Klaas J. Kraay and Chris

Following Guy Kahane, we can identify *pro-theism* as the view that God’s existence would be good in that God’s existence increases the value of a world, and *anti-theism* as the view that God’s existence would decrease the value of a world.<sup>3</sup> Following Klaas Kraay and Chris Dragos, we can note that both pro-theism and anti-theism can be subdivided to account for the value impact God’s existence would have to a particular person (personal scope), all persons (impersonal scope), in some particular respect (narrow scope), or overall (wide scope).<sup>4</sup>

The basic idea behind the Morally Good Agent argument is that morally good agents tend to add value to states of affairs, and God, moral agent *par excellence* is no exception. Based on the added value that moral agents can add to any state of affairs, we argue that the existence of God would be, on balance, a good thing and therefore something that one can rationally desire to be true. The argument generalizes to all the various types of pro-theism, and thus in what follows we’ll simply use the generic designation “pro-theism.”<sup>5</sup>

## **I. The Morally Good Agent Argument**

### **A. States of Affairs, Value Assessments, and Morally Good Agents**

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Dragos, “On Preferring God’s Non-Existence,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 43 (2013): 157-178; and Tim Mawson, “On Determining How Important it is Whether or Not there is a God.” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4 (2012): 95-105.

<sup>3</sup> Guy Kahane, “Should We Want God to Exist?” 674-696.

<sup>4</sup> Klaas J. Kraay and Chris Dragos, “On Preferring God’s Non-Existence,” 159 – 160.

<sup>5</sup> If God adds value to *every* state of affairs, it doesn’t matter if we’re talking about states of affairs assessing the individual in certain respects (narrow, personal pro-theism), the individual overall (wide, personal pro-theism), or whether we’re talking about states of affairs assessing value unqualified with respect to particular persons, but qualified in certain respects (narrow, impersonal pro-theism) or value unqualified in any respect (wide, impersonal pro-theism).

Suppose we think of events as a set of states of affairs that can track change over time. On this account, a simple event like a glass of soda losing its fizz would be construed as a series of temporally successive states of affairs such that the soda in the glass at later states is less carbonated than the soda in the glass at earlier states. And if the quality of soda for drinking is connected to the quantity of carbonation such that (typically) more carbonation is better, it makes sense to see this particular event as negative, one in which something bad, or at least undesirable, happens. On such a metric, with respect to carbonation earlier states of affairs were better than later ones, and this event is one which deteriorated qualitatively over time.<sup>6</sup>

Events as series of temporally successive states of affairs can also track changes with respect to moral properties. When a morally bad event occurs, earlier states of affairs within the event had a higher moral value than later states of affairs. This kind of account for change in morally significant events assumes that states of affairs can be compared with respect to their moral value. Of course, the traffic here can flow in other ways: some events can track change where the overall moral value of the state of affairs resulting from the event neither increases nor decreases, and some events can track change where the overall moral value of the culminating state of affairs is better than the state of affairs with which the event began.

We'd like to introduce a working hypothesis for this last category of events—events where the overall moral value of the culminating state of affairs is better than the state of affairs with

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<sup>6</sup> For more detailed accounts of events, see Jaegwon Kim, 'Events as Property Exemplifications', in M. Brand and D. Walton (eds.), *Action Theory*, (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1976): 159–77; Roberto Casati and Achille Varzi, "Events", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/events/>>.

which the event began, and the working hypothesis is this: introducing a morally good agent to a state of affairs makes things better. It can reasonably be asked by what standard we are assigning value. That is: What do we mean by the term “better”? We believe that a strength of our argument is that what we argue fits with many difference accounts of the concept *better*. While a full discussion of different conceptions of value is impossible here, we offer some examples of different understandings of value that will all work with our argument.

Consequentialists will spell out “better” as long-term flourishing. Flourishing can be measured in terms of happiness, or psychological well-being, or something more practical such as utility. One can also distinguish between individual and group flourishing. While the most promising objections to our argument hinge on individual flourishing, we assert that our argument succeeds on either individual or group accounts of flourishing.<sup>7</sup> Virtue theorists might want to understand “better” based on what kinds of virtues are exemplified by agents. Inasmuch as an agent cultivates and exemplifies virtue, things are better. When agents fail to cultivate virtue and exemplify vice then things are worse. Here the focus is the agent herself, rather than consequences or rule following that contributes to making things better. Deontologists might prefer to assign value in terms of how well things accord with moral principles. Things are better when agents abide by certain established moral principles and worse when they fail to abide those principles. The consequences or motives matter less on deontological accounts of value.

There is a large and nuanced literature on these and other theories which understand the concept of *better* in different ways. For any of these theories, however, there will be a coherent way to spell out a notion of better that fits well with our working hypothesis that introducing a

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<sup>7</sup> See Section B. Divine Entailment Objections from Privacy Considerations; the objections in this section are based on concerns regarding *individual* privacy.

morally good agent to a state of affairs makes things better. Thus, a strength of our argument is that we need not take sides on debates over how to assign value.

## **B. Morally Good Agent Case Studies**

We'll make an important qualification to our hypothesis that introducing a morally good agent to a state of affairs makes things better in a moment, but for now let's look at some clear examples where the hypothesis seems to be confirmed. All of the following cases assume the following background condition:

### Background Condition: Carl's Car

*Carl's car breaks down on the freeway. Carl pulls over, but is at a loss as to what to do. He has no phone and no ability to fix his car.*

Case 1 introduces a morally good agent, Susan, into the situation:

### Case 1: Along Comes Susan

*Susan is a morally good agent and upon seeing Carl stranded on the freeway, pulls over and offers assistance. She lends Carl her phone so that he can call a tow-truck. Upon hearing that Carl has no credit card with which to pay for the tow-truck, she pays for the tow with her own credit card.*

Now compare Case 1 with the following alternative scenario:

### Case 2: Nobody Cares

*Carl raises the hood of his car, turns on the hazard lights, and stands beside the car waving at passing cars in order to attract some help. No one stops. Eventually, even though Carl is in poor health, Carl starts walking toward the nearest town seventeen miles away.*

Let's further stipulate that the only relevant difference between the events described in Case 1 and Case 2 is that in Case 1, we've introduced a morally good agent, Susan, whereas Case 2 lacks such an agent. And with Case 1, it seems like we have a clear case in which introducing a morally good

agent to an event makes things better. Certainly from Carl's perspective, this is so. And of course, based on the information we've been given, the reason that things go better in Case 1 than in Case 2 is that Susan is a morally good agent, and morally good agents tend to want to make things better.<sup>8</sup>

In general, morally good agents want to act in ways that benefit others insofar as they have the ability and means to do so, sometimes at great personal cost. Morally good agents often work to alleviate suffering and help others achieve worthy goals—not purely out of their own selfish desires, but in part or in whole out of the desire to help others because others are seen as intrinsically worthy. So, it's not just the outcome of an agent's action that indicates the presence of morally good agency. For an action to be an action of morally good agency, it must be undertaken out of concern for the well-being of someone or something beyond one's self.

A morally good agent tends to want to improve the situations in which she finds herself; an effective morally good agent tends to know how to set goals in situations such that achieving those goals would result in a morally improved state of affairs, and tends to act accordingly. However, being a morally good agent doesn't require moral perfection, for even a very good but finite moral creature can have an off day. Rather, in situations where a morally good agent uncharacteristically knowingly fails to act in a way that improves the situation X in which she finds herself we can say that with respect to X she is not acting with morally good agency even

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, details could be added to both Case 1 and Case 2 such that the results are inverted. For example, perhaps Susan's intervention in Case 1 enables Carl's vicious helplessness and robs him of an opportunity to demonstrate his ability to handle adversity—a good that is experienced in Case 2 where no one comes to help Carl. But the possibility of the cases being modified in those ways doesn't undermine the plausible initial support that the cases are examples in which introducing morally good agents to states of affairs improves those states of affairs.

though she remains, on balance, a morally good agent. This is because her character, evidenced by her track record, indicates that this failure to act for moral improvement is the exception and not the norm.

Sadly, the morally good action of a morally good agent doesn't guarantee an outcome in which things become better. Consider the following scenario:

### Case 3: At Least He Meant Well

*George is a morally good agent and upon seeing Carl stranded on the freeway, pulls over and offers assistance. However, as George begins to slow down, the brakes fail on George's car causing him to crash into Carl who is killed immediately on impact.*

Here introducing a particular morally good agent, George, makes the outcome of Case 3 much worse than the outcome of Case 2, where no morally good agent was introduced. But what goes wrong in Case 3 is not that George fails to act with morally good agency. George is a morally good agent: he wants to help this stranger on the side of the road, and had things gone a bit differently with respect to the brakes in his car, the outcome would easily have been better than the outcome in Case 2. No, the problem in Case 3 is that morally good agents are subject to factors beyond their control. And when those factors impede the ability of the morally good agent to bring about the good they desire to bring about, it's possible that the actual outcome is much worse than the intended outcome.

Thus, the needed qualification to our working hypothesis becomes clear: introducing a morally good agent to a state of affairs makes things better *unless the agent is constrained in ways that prevent the agent from exercising effective morally good agency*. This qualification seems to present the right kind of exception clause in Case 3 where George was constrained by lack of

information. This qualification also seems to get the correct results when we consider the following case:

#### Case 4: Crash and Burn

*Carl's parked car is struck by a large truck, trapping Carl inside. The truck speeds off, but along comes Tom, a morally good agent, who stops at the accident scene and immediately runs toward the twisted wreck in which Carl is trapped. Smelling gasoline and seeing sparks, Tom knows he only has moments to rescue Carl, but Tom isn't strong enough to pry open the bent car door. As Tom retreats in order to call 911, Carl's car explodes and is engulfed in flames.*

The similarity between Case 3 and Case 4 is clear: in both cases, introducing a morally good agent into the background condition failed to improve the state of affairs because in each case, the morally good agent was constrained in a way that prevented the agent from exercising effective morally good agency. Morally good agency will be effective only if the agent is able to bring about positive change into the circumstances in which the morally good agent acts. This is not to say that the agents in Cases 3 and 4 act immorally, or that they fail to act in a morally praiseworthy manner. Rather, it is to say that the morally good actions of these morally good agents failed to improve the situation in which they were introduced.

### **B. The Morally Good Agent Argument**

We're now in a position to present our main argument for pro-theism.

#### The Morally Good Agent Argument

1. For any state of affairs  $x$ , introducing a good moral agent  $S$  to  $x$  adds value to that state of affairs unless  $S$  is constrained in ways that prevent  $S$  from exercising effective morally good agency.
2. God is a good moral agent.



3. God is not constrained in ways that prevent God from exercising effective morally good agency.

4. So, for any state of affairs  $x$ , introducing God to  $x$  adds value to that state of affairs.

Premise (1) is supported by considerations from the cases above. It's plausible to think that adding a morally good agent to a state of affairs will make things better (as with Case 1), unless that agent is constrained in ways that will impact the ability of the good agent to bring about improvement. In Case 3, George initially lacked knowledge that his brakes were about to fail. Presumably, being a good moral agent, had George known that his brakes were about to fail, he would have avoided pulling over and therefore avoided crashing into Carl. Moreover, once George acquired knowledge that his brakes were failing, George lacked the power to avoid causing harm—by hypothesis, at that point in the scenario it was too late for George to avoid causing great harm even though his initial intentions were good. In Case 4, Tom simply lacked the power to exercise effective morally good agency.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> One might wonder whether or not the constraint clause in premise (1) is necessary when the agent is God because God is a maximally great being because a maximally great being adds to the value of any state of affairs in which that being exists. We aren't denying this; however, our argument focuses on the value God's *agency* would have if God exists, even if a general case for pro-theism is plausible without specific reference to agency. We believe an argument for pro-theism that includes reference to agency is stronger than one without since as a maximally great being God will exercise agency in positive ways. The constrained clause is necessary, then, since even as a maximally great being God's agency is constrained in important ways (e.g. if humans are libertarian free then God cannot control the free acts of humans). Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting us to be clearer on this point.

Premise (2) is supported by the classic theistic concept of God as perfectly good which is part of the theistic tradition of perfect being theology.<sup>10</sup> If God is a moral agent, on theism, God would be a good moral agent.<sup>11</sup> Notice also that (2)'s being true wouldn't require God to be the source of moral goodness and would be consistent with a variety of theistic responses to the Euthyphro dilemma. And similar to (2), premise (3) is supported by the theist's claim that God is maximally great, and as such is omniscient and omnipotent in addition to being omnibenevolent. According to (3), a being with these attributes won't be constrained in the ways that finite good moral agents would be in adding value to states of affairs in certain situations.<sup>12</sup>

(4) follows from (1) – (3), but there needs to be some further comment on what exactly is meant by “introducing God to [some state of affairs]  $x$ .” First, if God is a necessary being, then if God exists in any possible world, God exists in every possible world. Second, if God is omnipresent, then any world  $\gamma$  in which God exists is such that no state of affairs in  $\gamma$  excludes

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of omnibenevolence see Thomas V. Morris, “*Anselmian Explorations*,” (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press: 1989). See also Mark Murphy, “Perfect Goodness”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/perfect-goodness/>.

<sup>11</sup> William Rowe, *Can God Be Free?* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> This isn't to deny that God's agency is not constrained in important ways. For example, if humans are libertarian free, then God might not be able to exercise agency that would contribute to a better state of affairs when such agency would violate human freedom. While this assumption about human freedom (and probably some other assumptions) limits the scope of God's agency, it doesn't entail that God can *never* exercise agency in ways that adds value to the world. It also doesn't follow that as a maximally great being God exercising agency doesn't contribute far more value to the world than finite humans (even on the assumption such agency is limited in certain ways). Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting us to clarify this point.

God. If these two conditions are part of the theistic concept of God on offer, what then can be meant by “introducing God to [some state of affairs]  $x$ ”? These concerns will be addressed in the next section.

## **II. Objections and Replies**

### **A. Preliminary Worry: The problem of Counter-possibles**

As noted, (4) might be challenged by reflecting on the fact that God is a necessary being. Consider the following conditional: if God does not exist, then the world has less value than it would have otherwise. If theism is true then this conditional turns out to be a counter-possible because it has an impossible antecedent. The antecedent claim that God does not exist is not possible if God is a necessary being and hence exists in every possible world. Typically counter-possibles are considered to be only trivially true. Thus, it can be argued that a meaningful analysis of the axiological value of theism cannot be provided.<sup>13</sup> We will not attempt to address this objection here in any detail. We assume that there must be some analysis of counter-possibles that makes the above conditional more than trivially true; considering this challenge to assessing the comparative value of God-inclusive and God-exclusive worlds, Kahane notes that he "understand[s] the comparison to involve the actual world and the closest possible world where

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<sup>13</sup> This objection was brought to our attention in a research proposal by Richard Brian Davis found here: <http://www.ryerson.ca/~kraay/theism.html>. See also Richard Brian Davis and W. Paul Franks, “Counterpossibles and the 'Terrible' Divine Command Deity,” *Religious Studies* 51 (2015): 1-19.

[the proposition that God exists] has the opposite truth value."<sup>14</sup> It is this comparison that we assume is meaningful throughout our paper.<sup>15</sup>

## **B. Divine Entailment Objections from Privacy Considerations**

According to this objection, God's existence (that is, the existence of a being with all the perfections as per perfect being theology) entails certain states of affairs that do in fact constrain God in ways that, contra premise (3), undermine the value God would add to states of affairs. Being perfect doesn't mean unconstrained—even a perfect being is constrained in certain respects.<sup>16</sup> So, if God's existence entails, for example, that creatures necessarily are unable to maintain privacy, and it's the case that this would undermine the value God's existence would add to states of affairs in various ways, then (3) is false. In what follows we explore some the ways that considerations about privacy might undermine premise (3) of the Morally Good Agent Argument.

### 1. What is privacy?

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<sup>14</sup> Guy Kahane, "Should We Want God to Exist?" 676.

<sup>15</sup> There is a similar type of problem when considering divine creation in 'no-best-world' scenarios. On one way of assigning value, theists will want to say that all possible worlds are equivalent given that God exists in every possible world and that God is infinitely valuable; on this metric, no world is better than any other—particularly so if one is considering only creatable worlds and the set of creatable worlds is a subset of possible worlds. And yet, it seems that there is a meaningful way of assessing the value of worlds according to which it makes sense that a possible world identical to the actual world but in which one is considerably less of a jerk is a better world than the actual world.

<sup>16</sup> Think of classic puzzles and parameters of omniscience here: e.g. God can't sin, can't experience relief at having forgotten an appointment but it wound up not being that big a deal, etc.

While ethical theories will analyze the right to privacy differently, a strength of this objection lies in that most theories will hold that we have some type of prima facie right to privacy.<sup>17</sup> Consider the following scenario:

### The Daughter's Diary

*A daughter keeps a diary of her innermost thoughts and desires. She keeps the diary locked up and hidden and wishes that no one read it. Her parents, however, discover the diary, break the lock, and read its entire contents. The parents then replace the lock and put the diary back.*

Even if the daughter never finds out that her parents have read her diary, there is a clear sense in which her privacy has been violated. Her privacy would not have been violated if she had given her parents' permission to read it.<sup>18</sup> Or perhaps violating the daughter's privacy would be morally justified if the parents had a moral reason to read her diary (e.g. they suspected she might be suicidal and wanted to intervene). There are probably other reasons why in certain situations our right to privacy should be voluntarily or involuntarily overruled. But the burden of proof is on the observer to either possess an overriding reason or have our permission. That is, the daughter does not have to prove that her diary should not be read.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. Privacy and Autonomy

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<sup>17</sup> Douglas P. Lackey, "Divine Omniscience and Human Privacy," *Philosophy Research Archives* Vol. X (March 1985): 383-384.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas P. Lackey, "Divine Omniscience and Human Privacy," 386.

It's plausible to think that respect for persons and individual autonomy generates the right for one to choose what information one reveals about one's self.<sup>20</sup> This also entails the right to choose whether to enter situations where information about one is inadvertently disclosed.<sup>21</sup> But one can never have this type of privacy from God and thus there is a sense in which one can never be completely alone or autonomous. For example, many theistic traditions claim that God is the perfect moral judge of our actions. If that's true, then one is unable to hide from God's judgment.<sup>22</sup> If privacy is connected to autonomy, one might think that God turns out to be the ultimate violator of our autonomy. This, in turn, would detract from the value that God's existence adds to the world and thus would provide a reason for denying premise (3). Note that this objection does not depend on how the information is being used (i.e. God wants the best for God's creatures). Rather, it relies on the idea that failure to respect privacy implies a failure to respect autonomy.<sup>23</sup>

### 3. Privacy and Trust

Trusting someone involves explicitly or implicitly having reason to think that a person will do something in relation to the person awarding the trust. It means believing that they will act a certain way even if one would never know if they did otherwise. That is, when we trust someone, we do not need to be there to enforce an explicit or implicit agreement. Since we are under constant

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<sup>20</sup> That is, unless this right gets overridden by obligations arising from greater goods. This tension between individual rights to privacy and the greater good of national security is precisely what's at issue in concerns over current invasions of privacy being undertaken by government.

<sup>21</sup> Lackey, "Divine Omniscience and Human Privacy."

<sup>22</sup> We note in section C that this also problematic because our moral intuitions might turn out to deeply conflict with God's moral intuitions.

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Falls-Corbitt and F. Michael McLain, "God And Privacy," *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol.9, No.3 (July 1992):373.

surveillance by God we never have the opportunity to develop this kind of trusting relationship with God. One might think that the very definition of a trustworthy person is such that they do not need to be constantly watched.<sup>24</sup> Without privacy, it seems that we lose out on the good of a trusting relationship with God.<sup>25</sup> If it is a bad thing not to have a trusting relationship with God then we have another reason to deny (3).<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. Replies

We now consider some possible replies to the objections raised above. Perhaps God *could* violate our privacy but refrains because her perfect goodness recognizes it would violate our right to privacy.<sup>27</sup> This response, if true, would succeed in defending premise (3) against the privacy objection. However, this response may very well require a *radical revision of our perfect being theology*. Many theists would worry that if God chose to respect our privacy she would not have complete knowledge and would thus fail to be a maximal being.<sup>28</sup>

Another way to defend premise (3) against the above attack is to simply admit that when it comes to the considerations raised about privacy that God's existence would indeed detract from

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<sup>24</sup> Margaret Falls-Corbitt and F. Michael McLain, "God And Privacy," 374.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>26</sup> This objection also points towards a paradox in that many theistic traditions hold that one of the highest human goals is seeking out and entering into a trusting relationship with God. But if theism is true and God constantly violates our privacy, then perhaps no such relationship is even possible.

<sup>27</sup> For the reasons discussed this is exactly what Margaret Falls-Corbitt and F. Michael McLain attempt to show.

<sup>28</sup> Also consider that if God is not a maximal being then God is no longer worthy of our worship. Some theistic traditions claim that God is the final moral judge of creation. But without complete knowledge, it is difficult to see how God could be a perfect judge. Thus, the idea that God respects our right to privacy comes at cost many theists will reject because it involves making too many costly revisions to standard perfect being theology.

the value of a world. But it could then be argued that the other goods associated with God's existence outweigh the negative costs. A full account of this response would need to spell out all the goods associated with God's existence and demonstrate that they outweigh the negative considerations. Such a list would be impossible to give here, but we will give three examples of goods associated with God's existence that help outweigh negative costs:

### *Justice*

Even though God's knowledge and power would preclude one's having complete privacy, a world with God includes a final and perfect judge which is a great good. There have been many evils perpetrated in our world that have gone, do go, and will go unaccounted for by humans because humans lack either the power, knowledge, or will to do anything about them. But on certain conceptions of theism, God is the final and perfect judge and as such will account for evil and suffering with perfect fairness. Not only does a cosmic judge satisfy our sense of fairness, there is psychological comfort that comes with thinking things will be set right. What the existence of God would mean is that while complete mental privacy cannot obtain, the great good of having a perfect judge would obtain.

### *Meaning/Afterlife*

Some argue that our lives cannot have objective meaning or significance unless we can ground our lives in something beyond us like God.<sup>29</sup> If ontological naturalism is true, every life is

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<sup>29</sup> There is, of course, debate over whether supernaturalism is needed for objective meaning. See William Lane Craig, "The Absurdity of Life without God", in Seachris, Josh (ed.), *Exploring the Meaning of Life: An Anthology and Guide*, (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons 2013): 151-172; Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Tim J. Mawson, "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life and Philosophy of Religion", *Philosophy Compass* 8 vol. 12 (2013): 1138–1146



bound to terminate in non-existence. All biological life will end and our universe will eventually implode. This does not mean that without God we cannot be happy, or set and accomplish goals; we can subjectively create meaning for our lives. But it does mean that our lives ultimately have no cosmic significance. While naturalism need not entail nihilism, it would be better if our lives had this type of cosmic objective meaning instead of only subjective meaning. Also, certain theistic traditions hold that we continue to survive after bodily death. If existence is a good, then then life after death is a good.<sup>30</sup> The possibility of meaning and an afterlife are goods that help outweigh any negative costs associated with theism. Again, we are not saying that these considerations in any way constitute evidence for theism; rather, they provide reasons for thinking that the existence of a morally good agent like God is purported to be would be a good state of affairs.

### *Objective Morality*

Various theists and non-theists alike have suggested that if God does not exist then there cannot be objective morality for in order for morality to be objective it must be grounded in something outside of humanity.<sup>31</sup> Some argue that without a divine lawgiver, morality can be nothing but subjective, thereby undermining the possibility of making plausible, objective moral pronouncements against, for example, racial prejudice or the torture and murder of innocents. Thus, if the existence of objective morality depends on God then there is another good which helps to offset the negatives entailed by God's existence, though admittedly this is contentious.

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<sup>30</sup> It is a common philosophical assumption that existence is a good.

<sup>31</sup> See Michael Ruse, "Evolutionary Theory and Christian Ethics," in *The Darwinian Paradigm*. (London: Routledge, 1989): 268-89; William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith* (Illinois: Crossway Books, 2008).

These three goods are only meant to serve as examples. Associating some of these goods with theism (and only theism) comes with deeply rooted philosophical controversy. If, however, some of the goods mentioned here, along with other goods only obtain if theism is true, then we are rational to claim that there are goods associated with God's existence that outweigh the negative costs of theism, in particular the cost of having our privacy violated.

While a violation of our privacy might constitute a violation of our autonomy, even if God only wants what's best of us there are a few distinctions worth noting here. Recall the case of the daughter's diary above. As imperfect moral agents the parents might not use the information from their daughter's diary in appropriate ways. Given the very fact that they're imperfect moral agents the parents might have no right to view the diary. Perhaps what makes reading the diary a violation of privacy is the very fact that the parents are imperfect moral agents. But God is a perfect moral agent who only wants what's best for creatures. So it's not clear that it would be rational to want privacy from a maximal being who only wants what's best for us.<sup>32</sup>

A different strategy to defend premise (3) against the privacy objections is to argue that while it is reasonable to believe that there are goods associated with God's existence that outweigh the negative costs, we are not in a good position to identify those particular goods. Thus, attempting to offer something like the list above is neither necessary nor possible, even though we might be justified in holding that such a list of goods exists. In what follows we offer some reasons to think that we are not able to identify goods associated with God's existence.

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<sup>32</sup> One area for further discussion that would challenge this response would be the conceptions of theism that entail punishment in the afterlife (e.g. certain forms of Christianity and Islam). Inasmuch as God violating my privacy means that God will send me to hell then I am rational to want privacy.

One strategy here is to borrow from ‘skeptical theism’, the popular but controversial defense against probabilistic arguments from evil.<sup>33</sup> Skeptical theists argue both that we are not in a good position to identify the justifying goods for certain evils and that one’s inability to discern what justification there could be for an evil does not entail that no such justification exists. We make a similar claim with respect to human ability to identify goods associated with God’s existence. By way of analogy, consider one’s ability to detect whether or not there is beer in the refrigerator. Assuming that our brains and bodies are functioning properly (in non-deceptive circumstances), every adult human is in a good position to tell whether or not there is beer in the refrigerator. However, the same cannot be said if we are asked to identify whether there is a certain type of micro-bacteria in the refrigerator. Even if our eyes and touch perception is functioning properly, we will not be able to tell if there is micro-bacteria in the refrigerator. Clearly in this latter case our inability to detect the bacteria does not provide us with good reason to think that there are in fact no bacteria in the refrigerator. It might be that when it comes to identifying the goods associated with God’s existence our epistemic situation is similar to the latter case of trying to detect bacteria. Since God is omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent, God is *very* different from finite humans. Therefore, just because we cannot detect certain goods associated with God’s existence, it does not follow that there are no such goods. Our inability to provide a complete or compelling list of goods is no reason to think that there is no such list.

An interesting connection to the above point is that there is some empirical data to suggest that humans are very bad at predicting what will make them happy: For various reasons, we are

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<sup>33</sup> There is a very large and technical literature on skeptical theism that we will not attempt to detail here. For a representative example of different views see *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*. Edited by Trent Dougherty and Justin P. McBrayer (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014).

often in a poor epistemic position to know what will make us happy. Christopher K. Hsee and Reid Hastie claim that “people systemically fail to predict or choose what maximizes their happiness... These findings challenge a fundamental assumption that underlies popular support for consumer sovereignty and other forms of autonomy in decision-making (e.g. marriage choice), namely, the assumption that people are able to make choices in their own best interests.”<sup>34</sup> Behavioral-decision researchers hold that there are multiple systematic biases which explain why we consistently fail to predict what will make us happy. People experience impact bias which means that they overestimate the impact of an event. One cause of this is focalism which is the idea that “predictors pay too much attention to the central event and overlook context events that will moderate the central event’s impact...”<sup>35</sup> People also suffer from projection bias when they make predictions in different visceral states. Thus, “For example, when people predict immediately after dinner how much they will enjoy a delicious breakfast the next morning, they understate the pleasure.”<sup>36</sup> Projection bias often leads people to make choices that they later regret. Memory bias also means that “[p]redictions of future experiences are often based on memories of related past experiences, but memory is fallible and introduces systemic biases into evaluations...”<sup>37</sup> While this empirical data is not conclusive, if goods and happiness are similar in the relevantly important ways, then it

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<sup>34</sup> Christopher K. Hsee and Reid Hastie, “Decision and experience: why don’t we choose what makes us happy?” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, vol 10 (2005): 31-37.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Christopher K. Hsee and Reid Hastie, “Decision and experience: why don’t we choose what makes us happy?”

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*; See also Timothy D. Wilson and Daniel T. Gilbert “Affective Forecasting: Knowing What to Want” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2005): 131-134.

does lend support to the idea that we are not in a good position to identify the goods associated with God's existence.

Finally, in order for the objection that God's omniscience constrains privacy in a way that prevents a trusting relationship with God, it would have to be clear that privacy is a necessary condition for trust. But it's not clear that this is the case. Observing someone acting in a way that we expect them to doesn't make them any less trustworthy. What might undermine trust is if observation is made a necessary condition of entrusting someone to act a certain way. But the existence of constant observation on its own doesn't entail that there can't be trust.

### **C. 'God is Not Good' Objections and Replies**

There are several interesting objections that can be raised against (2) of the Morally Good Agent argument. Recall that according to (2):

(2) God is a good moral agent.

This premise was defended by appealing to the classic theistic concept of God which includes the attribute of perfect goodness. However, some might object to, or at the very least qualify, (2) with the following considerations.

#### 1. God is a Moral Monster

It could be argued that if God has characteristics portrayed in the sacred texts of certain scriptures, then God is a moral monster who commands genocide and rape. And if that's what God is like, then we've strong intuitive moral reasons for thinking that God is decidedly not a good moral agent and thus (2) is false.<sup>38</sup> Consider two examples from the Judeo-Christian scriptures.

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<sup>38</sup> See *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*. Edited by Michael Bergmann, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rea (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011).

Genesis 6:17 says “For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die.”<sup>39</sup> In 1 Samuel 15:3 God orders the Israelites to “Now go and strike the Amalekites and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.”<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, it could be argued that if some form of theological determinism is true, and it’s the case that some have lives which include eternal damnation, then God is ‘the author of sin’ and an even worse moral monster than the one described in the previous objection.<sup>41</sup> Despite strong moral intuitions against theological determinism, there is a strong theological determinist tradition in Christianity typically grounded in some form of Calvinism.<sup>42</sup> If Calvinism is true, then God not only foreknows, but pre-ordains those who are eternally ‘saved’ and those who are eternally ‘damned.’<sup>43</sup> Thus, there are many people who, *by no fault of their own*, are eternally damned. Since their salvation is determined before they exist, God necessarily lacks a justifying reason for why one person is saved and another damned. A God who would operate this way, so the objection goes, is morally abhorrent. We could hardly consider premise (2) to be true if theological determinism turns out to be true and some are non-culpably damned for all eternity.

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<sup>39</sup> Genesis 6:17, *The Bible*. English Standard Version.

<sup>40</sup> 1 Samuel 15:3, *The Bible*. English Standard Version; see also Genesis 19:24-25 and Deuteronomy 20:16-17.

<sup>41</sup> See Jerry L. Walls, “Why No Classical Theist, Let Alone Orthodox Christian, Should Ever be a Compatibilist,” *Philosophia Christi* Vol. 13, No. 1, 2011; and Roger E. Olson, *Against Calvinism*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan: 2011).

<sup>42</sup> See John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (USA: Baker Academic, 1987).

<sup>43</sup> This assumes a doctrine of heaven and hell which is currently an open debate within Christianity.

One possible reply is to simply make a strong appeal to moral intuition and argue that the morally suspect portrayals of God are inaccurate. Since classical theism entails that (2) is necessarily true, then God cannot be a moral monster and theological determinism must be false. This response could go two different ways. First, we could argue that this means (re)interpreting certain scriptures to fit with (2). Some authors attempt to do this by placing these texts in their historical, social, and theological settings. Or second, one could simply insist that because (2) is true, then those scriptures are really not representative of the divine and should be given up as such. Though many are tempted to give much weight to their moral intuitions, this second response is unlikely to gain very much traction with devout theists. A devout Jew or Christian will be very unwilling give up the Old Testament as a sacred text. A devout Muslim is not likely to reject the Koran as the final word to Muhammad. Therefore, for those many theists who wish to preserve their moral intuitions, they will have to (re)interpret their scriptures in ways that don't make God a moral monster or that don't entail theological determinism. This means examining a variety of in-house theological debates that go well beyond the scope of our paper. For those satisfied that their sacred texts align with their moral intuitions the objection ends here. But for those who think such responses are ad hoc or wrongly utilize eisegesis to interpret scripture then an objection remains. That is, it could turn out that the only way to preserve God's goodness is by acknowledging that the actual axiological landscape is much different than what maps on to our current moral intuitions.

## 2. The Inverted Moral Spectrum Problem

Suppose that God is a moral agent *par excellence* and as such is morally perfect, regardless of whether moral properties are determined by God or merely perfectly exemplified by God. Suppose also that contrary to our common moral intuitions things like murder and genocide are

morally good while things like charity and kindness towards others are morally bad. Suppose further that this is true for every moral intuition one has, where everything one takes to be good is in fact bad and vice versa. Call this the problem of the ‘inverted moral spectrum’ where all the properties I’m inclined to call good are in fact bad, and vice versa. If that’s the case, then even though (2) would technically be true, it would be such that given one’s strong moral intuitions, either there’s no way to rationally believe it (provided one becomes aware, somehow, of what God’s being good actually entails with respect to God’s moral properties) or it’s possible to rationally believe it in a material sense, but the proposition one thinks is expressed by the sentence “God is a good moral agent” is radically different in context from the proposition *God is a good moral agent*.<sup>44</sup> Is the possibility of having an inverted moral spectrum sufficient to undermine (2) of the Morally Good Agent Argument?

In response, it is worth pointing out that unless one thinks one’s moral intuitions are an infallible guide to the moral landscape, one will need to acknowledge the potential gap between moral perception and moral reality. The relevant question then becomes: to what degree do one’s moral intuitions and perceptions accurately reflect the moral landscape? If one’s moral spectrum is inverted and, as would seem likely, one is unaware of the inversion (how *could* one come to know that they have an inverted moral spectrum?), it would turn out that the theist’s picture of what God is like is very different from what God is actually like, though (2) of the argument would still remain unscathed.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>44</sup> For a presentation of similar concerns, see Ralph Wedgwood, “The Moral Evil Demons,” in [Disagreement](#), edited by Richard Feldman and Ted Warfield (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010): 216-246.



We began by analyzing four cases which demonstrate that there are good reasons for holding that morally good agents add value to states of affairs. These considerations motivate our Morally Good Agent Argument which concludes that for any state of affairs  $x$ , introducing God to  $x$  adds value to that state of affairs. Thus, the Morally Good Agent Argument is an argument that supports pro-theism, the view that God's existence would be good in that God, if she existed, would add value to a world. This argument has strong intuitive pull as God is a maximal being and hence is not constrained in ways that afflict finite morally good agents.

One objection to our argument is that the conditional "if God does not exist, then the world has less value than it would have otherwise" is a counter-possible and hence only trivially true.<sup>45</sup> Another worry is that privacy might turn out to be necessary for goods such as autonomy, and trusting relationships. But if God is omniscient then God constantly violates our privacy and hence we lose out on the goods associated with it. Finally, there might be reasons to think that God is not good, or at the very least that our moral intuitions conflict with God's so strongly that we could not rationally think it better that God exist. We believe that there are successful replies to be made

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<sup>45</sup> However, as discussed in footnote 15 above, there does seem to be a meaningful sense of comparing and ranking worlds qualitatively on one scale even if worlds are equivalent on another scale.

and thus that we have given a plausible initial presentation and defense of the Morally Good Agent Argument for pro-theism.<sup>46, 47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> For strategies of response to the claim that that God of Bible is not morally good, see Michael Bergmann, Michael Murray, and Michael Rea, "Introduction," in *Divine Evil*; see also Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Reading Joshua," in *Divine Evil*. For a response to the challenge posed by the problem of the inverted moral spectrum, we know of no extant literature on this specific topic, although the issues raised by it are similar in some respects to issues that generate and are raised by the Euthyphro dilemma. There are, however, two points worth noting concerning the inverted moral spectrum problem. First, as noted above, this objection doesn't defeat (2) of the Morally Good Agent Argument; instead, the objection presents a scenario in which it is nearly impossible believe (2). Second, much like 'common sense' responses to external world skepticism, one could reject the inverted moral spectrum by appealing to the common and pervasive experiences with respect to making moral judgments.

<sup>47</sup> Work on this project received generous support from the John Templeton Foundation for which we are exceedingly grateful. We also wish to acknowledge and express gratitude for the helpful feedback we received when earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Ryerson Philosophy of Religion Work in Progress Group, the Australasian Association for Philosophy, and the Ryerson University Philosophy Department Colloquium. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewer from *Philosophia Christi* for helpful comments, and to Klaas Kraay in particular for helpful comments on earlier drafts and for encouraging us to think about the axiological implications of theism.

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