Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 31 | Issue 2 Article 2

4-1-2014

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Recommended Citation
Davis, Stephen T. (2014) "On Preferring that God Not Exist (or That God Exist): A Dialogue," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 31 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.
DOI: 10.5840/faithphil2014566
Available at: https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol31/iss2/2

ON PREFERRING THAT GOD NOT EXIST (OR THAT GOD EXIST): A DIALOGUE

Stephen T. Davis

Recently a new question has emerged in the philosophy of religion: not whether God exists, but whether God's existence is or would be preferable. The existing literature on the subject is sparse (see, for example, footnotes 2, 3, 4, and 5). The present essay, in dialogue form, is an attempt to marshal and evaluate arguments on both sides.

I

Suppose there are two philosophers, Jill and William, who are colleagues at a small, secular liberal arts college in the mid-west. Jill is an ethicist and William a historian of philosophy, especially of American philosophy. Both are also interested in the philosophy of religion. They disagree on whether it is or would be a desirable thing if God existed. By the word "God," they mean the Judeo-Christian God, i.e., (minimally) the omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and loving creator of the heavens and the earth. Moreover, Jill and William know full well that their wishes have nothing to do with the fact of the matter, i.e., with whether God exists or not.

Suppose further that so far as the existence of God is concerned (as opposed to the desirability of God's existing), both philosophers accept Pascal's claim that "Reason can decide nothing here."[1] Jill is a theist and William is an agnostic, but they agree that while there are arguments and evidence on both sides, God's existence can be neither proved nor disproved. They also agree that if God exists, God is a necessary being.[2]

One afternoon Jill and William happen to meet in the Student Union an hour before a departmental meeting. They sit down at a table with their lattes.

II

William: Jill, This might be a good time for us to have that talk about God we've been intending to have. It looks like we've got about an hour. Does that sound okay?

[1]Blaise Pascal *Pascal's Pensees*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958), no. 233, pp. 65–69.

[2]T. J. Mawson, "On Determining How Important It Is Whether or Not There Is a God," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4 (2012), 98–99.

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doi: 10.5840/faithphil2014566

Jill: Well, I was going to start grading these blue books. But, okay, sure. I'd rather talk philosophy than grade exams any day. But I'm afraid I've forgotten precisely how we were going to frame the question.

William: I think we were going to talk not about the existence of God but the desirability of God. Do you remember: I said that I prefer that God not exist and you said that you prefer that God exist?

Jill: Yes, now I do remember. But the trouble with that topic is that I'm not sure we will have much to argue about. Since we will just be talking about our respective preferences, as opposed to our beliefs, it will be like somebody saying, "I prefer steak to pizza" and somebody else saying, "I prefer pizza to steak." They aren't really disagreeing. So if you say, "I prefer that God not exist" and I say "I prefer that God exist," what is there for us to argue about?

William: But we can certainly argue about the *reasons* for our preferences. In the steak and pizza case, I suppose there probably aren't any reasons aside from personal tastes (if they count as reasons). But in the God case there surely are reasons. I certainly can give reasons why I think it would be better if God didn't exist.

Jill: I see. So the question, then, is whether our reasons are *good* reasons, right?

William: That's it. We'll be asking questions such as, is X a good reason for preferring that God exist? Or, is Y a good reason for preferring that God not exist? And if we can answer questions like that, our overall issue is not one where we must bump into a kind of relativism or subjectivism. We will at least have a shot at reaching a sound conclusion such as, say, "Overall, there is more reason or better reason to prefer that God exist than to prefer that God not exist." In other words, while some *preferences* are undoubtedly subjective, the question of what *is preferable*, at least in cases like this, is objective.

Jill: All right. You've convinced me. Of course it is entirely possible that there exists an objective truth on the question of whether it is preferable that God exist or not exist, but that given human intellectual limitations we will be unable to decide which it is.

William: Fair enough.

Jill: But let's begin. So what are your reasons for preferring that God not exist?

William: To begin with, let me say that I agree with Thomas Nagel. I'm sure you recall that he said, "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."[3]

[3]Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130.

Jill: Yes, I understand that that is your position. But why? I don't recall that Nagel really explained himself on this point. Why do you prefer that God not exist?

William: It's a long story. One reason—not the most important—has to do with God's omniscience and omnipresence. Nobody likes to have people snooping on them, having voyeurs peeking in the windows, and so on. Similarly, I want my privacy; I don't like the idea that God observes everything I do and knows all my innermost thoughts.

Jill: But that's absurd, William. I accept that if theism is true, there are no secrets from God; but the point is that God is perfectly good. God is not going to use any of that information against us. God is not going to publish our social security numbers or blab private facts about you or me all over town. God is for us, not against us.

William. I realize that this is the view of God that we are presupposing, but somehow I still think it's creepy and invasive to think that God knows everything about me. Even if God is perfectly good, it still seems like a violation of some kind of personal right.

Jill: Well, I suppose I find it comforting; but I don't see how we can fruitfully argue about whether it is creepy or comforting. But I do want to argue that privacy can be a bad thing.[4] Think, for example, of those horrible people who sexually molest children—school teachers, priests, whoever they are. They count on privacy. I have always very much liked that statement of Jesus: "For nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known" (Luke 8:17). In other words, although God's knowledge does not stop child abuse, it does mean that there can be justice.

William: There can be justice but *will* there be justice?

Jill: If you believe in God, yes; there will be justice. Perhaps I'll talk about that when I give my reasons. However, you did say that privacy was not your most important reason for thinking it better that God not exist. What then is your most important reason?

William: I want to run my own life, make my own decisions, live as I want to live. I don't want any higher being, or member of the clergy, or sacred book, telling me what to believe and do. I don't want to have any obligations to God about how I must live my life. I think Guy Kahane puts the point nicely: I do not want to live in a universe in which we human beings "are the subordinates of a moral superior, a superior who deserves our allegiance and worship, and where we have been created to play a part in some divine cosmic plan."[5]

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[4]Klaas Kraay, "On Preferring God's Non-Existence," forthcoming in the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 13.

[5]Guy Kahane, "Should We Want God to Exist?," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72:3 (May, 2011), 682.

Jill: Perhaps we can call this the "autonomy" reason for preferring that God not exist. As I'm sure you know, there has been a great deal of attention given to the notion of autonomy in recent moral and political philosophy. It began with Kant and still continues today.

William: Is there any consensus?

Jill: Not much. I think it is widely agreed that personal autonomy is a great good, maybe even an intrinsic good. You are considered autonomous if you govern yourself, if you live by your own reasons and decisions, if you deliberate among various well-understood options and then freely decide. That makes you a responsible agent. You are *not* autonomous if you are manipulated by influences that are external to you, even if they are paternalistically motivated. You are not autonomous if you must do what an external authority commands that you do.[6]

William: That sounds much like what I was saying. So I agree that we can call this "the autonomy argument."

Jill: In any case, your argument reminds me of a comment that a student made to me a few years ago—a comment that naturally is considerably less sophisticated than the case you've just made. In my philosophy of religion course, at the end of the unit on the theistic proofs, a student after class said to me, "Professor, I don't want any of these arguments for God to be sound; I am an atheist and I want to run my own life; I don't want God in charge of my life."

William: Yes, that's pretty much the idea. But I should point out that if your student's atheism was based on her desires, I would say that that would amount to an intellectual fault; it would be something close to wishful thinking. I would define "wishful thinking" as believing that something is true not because of evidence that it is true but because of a desire that it be true. But in my case, my preference that God not exist—so far as I know my own mind—is quite unrelated to my opinion about the existence of God. I am agnostic on the existence of God because of what I take to be the state of the evidence.

Jill: Yes, I can see your point. It is possible to be an atheist and (maybe somewhat nostalgically) prefer that God exist. And it is possible to be a theist and wish that God not exist, to regret (so to speak) that God exists. I suspect, however, that it is normally the opposite. Theists usually prefer that God exist and atheists (and maybe agnostics) prefer that God not exist.

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[6]See, for example, Joel Feinberg, *Harm To Self: The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 27–51; Thomas Hurka, "Why Value Autonomy?," *Social Theory and Practice* 13:3 (Fall 1987), 361–382; John Christman, "Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2009); and John Christman, "Constructing the Inner Citadel: Recent Work on the Concept of Autonomy," *Ethics* 99:1 (October 1988), 109–124.

William: True enough. But, you see, I cringe whenever I hear a religious person say something along the lines of, "I just don't know how I could make it through life without God." I think that sort of thing is demeaning. We're stronger than that; we don't need God. Of course life is hard, but whatever happens in life, we human beings just have to deal with it as best we can. Religion tends to enslave people rather than liberate them. Religious people are weak.

Jill: What?

William: Okay, that's too strong. Let me rephrase it: Religion tends to weaken people. I just don't like the idea of having to kowtow to a higher being.

Jill: Well, aside from the privacy issue (which I admit I do not get at all), you've made two points so far: first, you prefer that God not exist because you want to be free to run your own life; you don't want to have any obligations to a higher being. Second, you prefer that God not exist because you think it is weak and demeaning to human beings to depend on God in the face of life's problems; it amounts to a kind of slavery. Does that pretty much amount to your argument?

William: I would add one more point (although I admit that it probably has more to do with the drawbacks of religious beliefs and practices than with drawbacks of God's existence): I prefer that God not exist because I think religion tends to deemphasize the present life. I'm talking about "pie in the sky" religion that makes people so emphasize the glories of the life to come that they neglect trying to solve present problems. Think of those Christians who are so fixated on the imminent return of Christ that they pooh-pooh current ecological problems because they think this world will not be here much longer.

Jill: Yes, there are people like that; I think this is in part the sort of thing that Marx was referring to by his "religion is the opiate of the people" remark. But I just want to point out that many Christians and Jews are deeply involved in what they call "creation care," i.e., trying to solve our current environmental problems. They think that God commands us to care for the earth. Moreover, even if God did not exist, there would presumably still be "pie in the sky" believers who (mistakenly) hope for the life to come.

William: Yes, I accept that. But I still think belief in God tends to make people concentrate on the next life rather than this one.

Jill: I want to return to your first point. Here's something that I think I've learned from my students: no idea is more commonly and unquestioningly accepted in today's society than individual autonomy. Our students think in this way: Nobody has the right to try to tell me what to believe or do, what political or social cause to support, whom to date and eventually

marry, what music to listen to, what to wear, how to style my hair—only I have the right to make those decisions. Anybody who tries to influence me in those directions is violating my personal rights.

William: You may be right about today's society. But even if your diagnosis is correct, that does nothing to refute the autonomy argument.

Jill: Still, I think the autonomy argument is weak. Even if the Judeo-Christian God exists, God gives us the ability to make free choices. Of course we are not totally free. I don't have the freedom to choose to be a great ballerina (which as a girl I desperately wanted) or the freedom magically to make my eight year old better at arithmetic. But I do have the freedom to obey God or not, to tell a lie or not, to break a promise or not. So even if God exists, I *do* have the ability to run my own life, make my own decisions.

William: Yes, but if I disobey God, there will be severe consequences that I will not like. God might punish me here and now or, even worse, send me to hell when I die. It's hard to see that I have a genuinely autonomous choice when I'm threatened with punishment for doing anything other than what God wants me to do. If a robber puts a gun to my head and says, "Your money or your life," he can't then argue that he has not infringed on my autonomy, just because I have the freedom to choose "my life."

Jill: I don't deny that if God exists, autonomy comes at a potential cost, but the two cases are different. When the robber threatens your life, he is trying to force you to do something that he has no *right* to force you to do. This is different from trying to force you to do something that you are *obligated* to do—such as the government forcing you to obey the law forbidding speeding in your car. God's intrusions on our autonomy are more like that, because we are (in my opinion) obligated to do what God says; God is only threatening to punish us if we fail to do what we should do.

William: Why do you think we are obligated to do what God wants us to do? Merely because you believe that God created us?

Jill: I don't want to get into Euthyphro-type problems, although I'm willing to take on those issues if you insist. Let's just limit ourselves to divine commands that virtually every moral thinker, religious or not, will admit are obligations. These are commands like "Do not kill" or "Do not bear false witness against your neighbor." I claim that we are obligated to obey those commands and accordingly are liable to righteous punishment if we don't.

William: To be brutally honest, what I want is the ability to make my own decisions with impunity, so far as eternal punishments are concerned. I want to get off Scott free—of God's wrath, that is—no matter what I decide to do. The crucial point is that I do not want to have duties to God, to *owe* anything to God.

Jill: It's true that if God exists you will not be able to disobey God with impunity. So I suppose I must admit that, for people who value autonomy as you do, that is one powerful reason to prefer that God not exist. Or perhaps I should say it's a valid point (to return to something you said a few moments ago) *as long as it is not the reason for atheism*. What I mean is this: although I'm sure they would be loath to admit it, I suspect that many non-believers these days are influenced by the following two-step argument:

1. I am not living the kind of life that God would want me to live if God existed;
2. Therefore, God does not exist.

Of course, this atheistic proof is absurdly fallacious as an argument; nevertheless, I think some people live by it.

William: I doubt it. Or at least this argument certainly does not describe me. But you might be closer to the truth if your conclusion instead said something such as, "Therefore, I will not believe that God exists." There might be people who live by *that* argument.

Jill: I'll take that as a friendly amendment.

William: But I have to mention one more thing on divine punishments: I think it would be wrong—no, I think it would be morally *outrageous*—for God to sentence people who have disobeyed him to an eternity of physical torture in the flames of hell. In my opinion, that's one big reason to prefer that God, or at least the Christian God, not exist.

Jill: I actually agree with much of that. There are in fact a variety of contemporary Christian views on hell.[7] I'm not a universalist, so I do believe in hell, but I do not believe in a hell of fire and agony. In my opinion, biblical images along those lines are just metaphors. Dante and Milton took them far too literally and I think it's unfortunate that those great poets have influenced so strongly the picture that most people have of hell.

William: What sort of hell do you believe in, then?

Jill: I think the existence of hell is an act of God's love, not vengeance. I think God sends nobody to hell who does not freely choose hell. The people who choose hell know that they could not—and do not want to—spend eternity in the presence of God. What is hell like? Well, I do not know and hope never to know, but I suspect it is a place of deep regret. Hell is separation from the direct presence of God, so it must be a place of minimal love, light, and beauty. Some time you might read C. S. Lewis's

[7]For my own views, see "Hell, Wrath, and the Grace of God," in *The Problem of Hell: A Philosophical Anthology*, ed. Joel Buenting (London: Ashgate, 2010), 91–102. For other opinions, see William Crockett (ed.), *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996).

The Great Divorce.[8] That book has been a helpful myth for lots of Christians, including me. My point is that people themselves decide to opt for a life without God; and God honors that choice.

Just then a student approached the two professors and said to Jill: "Professor Harris, have you by any chance graded our mid–terms yet?" Jill replied: "No, I haven't; I hope to hand them back on Thursday at the conclusion of class." The student replied, "Okay, thank you; I apologize for interrupting," and then walked off. Jill then said to William: "These students! That's pretty amazing; I just gave them that exam two hours ago. Do they think I have nothing else to do in my life but grade their exams?"

III

William: I know. But getting back to our conversation, I think I've explained my views for long enough. Now, Jill, unless you object, it's your turn. Why do you prefer that God exist?

Jill: This too is a long story. It has to do with what is often called "the human condition." My overall point is that human beings have needs that they desperately want to be met and questions that they desperately want to be answered. These are some of our deepest longings as human beings. And I prefer that God exist because I think that God can meet those needs and provide those answers. Some of the questions that I have in mind, by the way, have answers on naturalism (some do not), but my point is that I much prefer the answers that are available if theism is true. Oh, and one more caveat: as you will see, some of the points that I want to make presuppose not just general theism but the Christian God.

William: Well, what needs and questions are you thinking of?

Jill: There are actually five of them; but I know I will have to be brief if we're going to make it to that department meeting. The first revolves around such questions as: Who am I? What is my place in the universe? Why do I exist? Is there any purpose to our lives? What is the best way for human beings to live?

William: Yes, those are questions that human beings—or reflective ones, anyway—ask. And I guess your point is that God, if God exists, can supply the answers.

Jill: Exactly. If God exists, we are creations of God; we might even say children of God. That's who we are. And the purpose of human life is to live in such a way as to honor God and serve humanity as best we can. That is why we are here. Now nonbelievers will of course deny that those claims are true. But I prefer that God exist because, if God exists and reveals his

[8]C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946).

desires to humans, we've got access to answers to some of our deepest questions.

William: And I prefer that God not exist because I want to keep struggling with those and other deep questions without being told that the answers are predetermined and can be found in the Bible or some other sacred text.

Jill: So groping around in the dark is better than being told the answer?

William: Absolutely. Of course on some of these questions, I think I know their answers with as much certainty as religious people have. Take the question, "Is there any purpose to our lives?" If "purpose" here means "transcendent purpose," I hold that the answer is no. Or take, "Why do I exist?" I say we exist because evolution produced us, and that's all there is to it. But on others—e.g., how should we best live?—if we could find the definitive answers ourselves (which I admit on this sort of question we're not likely to do), that would be fine. But I do want to keep thinking about them. That's one reason that I am a philosopher.

Jill: Okay, we will just have to agree to disagree about that. But this leads immediately to my second point: I think we human beings long for a universe in which we matter. Suppose that we live in a Godless universe, as you prefer. Then whether we live or die, whether we suffer or enjoy ourselves, whether our children succeed in life or fail—those things do not ultimately matter. They matter no more in the overall scheme of things than one tadpole in that pond in back of your home living or dying or one small stone being crushed by a glacier. As Meursault says in Camus's *The Stranger*, "Nothing, nothing matters."[9] But if God exists, we do matter because God created us and loves us. My life is not like that of the tadpole because God deeply cares for me.

William: If there is no God, the only things that matter are things that matter *to us*. What matters, in my opinion, is whether I live my life in such a way as to improve, however slightly, my lot and the lot of my fellow human beings. But I agree that without God there is no transcendent meaning or purpose of human life. I'd say we just have to accept that point and do our best. So what is your third point?

Jill: It has to do with the fact that we live in a tough world. As I was taught years ago as a first year college student on the very first day in Economics 101, the resources that are out there are scarce and so there will be competition for them. Sometimes the competition will be violent. Life is hard. And I consequently think another deep need of human beings is to avoid misfortune and suffering as much as possible for oneself and one's loved ones.

William: That is certainly true, but I can't imagine what your argument for preferring God in this area might be. Despite those "health and

[9]Albert Camus, *The Stranger* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 121.

wealth" preachers that we see on television, I have noticed no correlation whatsoever between being religious and suffering less, or between being irreligious and suffering more.

Jill: I grant you that point. Religion is not a rabbit's foot that keeps bad fortune away. But if God exists, then quite apart from God's eschatological promises (which, as I said, is a point that I want to get to later), God offers us comfort, strength, and guidance in the face of suffering. I heard you say that you cringe when people say, "I don't know how I could make it in life without God." But I don't cringe at all. For believers in God, I think that is a perfectly valid point. God promises to be with us in our suffering. We can have a kind of peace if we trust in God. We believe, as the great medieval mystic Julian of Norwich said, "And all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."[10]

William: That sounds more like a benefit of belief in God rather than of God actually existing.

Jill: Except that if God does exist you can not only subjectively experience peace in the midst of trouble but actually experience peace that God gives you.

William: True, but I've already commented on this issue of help in the midst of trouble; I think we just have to rely on ourselves, not God. What's your fourth point?

Jill: Despite the fact that we human beings like to think of ourselves as morally good, I think almost all humans are troubled by guilt. We all know that we have often failed to live up to our own or society's moral standards, let alone God's standards, if God exists. And some people are deeply troubled by feelings of guilt. Apart from God, there are all kinds of secular ways of dealing with guilt—repressing it, punishing yourself, telling yourself that lots of people are worse than you, blaming your misdeeds on others (e.g., on the way your parents raised you), or getting therapy.

William: Wait a minute. It also bothers me that Christians go around insisting that people are sinners. Now you and I have been colleagues for several years, and I think you know me pretty well. And I do not admit to being a "sinner." I know I'm not perfect; I make mistakes; I've done things I'm not proud of. But I think I'm a fairly moral person. So why are Christians so hung up on this "Everybody is a sinner" kick?

Jill: William, you *are* a moral person. But we were supposed to be talking about the desirability of God's existence, not the truth of Christian claims about sin. Nevertheless, since it clearly troubles you, let me say something about that point. When Christians say that all people are sinners, the

[10]Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Clifton Wolters (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 103–104.

claim is not that all people are moral monsters like Hitler or Stalin, or that they are as bad as they could possibly be. Christians don't deny that some people are morally better than other people or that people can perform morally good acts.

William: Well, then what does it mean?

Jill: It means that people fail to live up to widely accepted moral standards, let alone God's standards. Think of it this way: Suppose we asked your mother (or anybody whom you completely trust) to follow you around for two months or so and write down every moral or ethical statement that you make. And suppose at the end of that time we collate the statements—statements you've made like "It's wrong to cheat on your income tax," "Don't lie to your parents," or whatever—into a list of moral rules that we might call "William's moral code" (or at least it would constitute much of it). Are you with me so far?

William: Sure, although we're getting back to my privacy concerns again. I'm especially uneasy about my mom being the observer. But I get it: it's just a thought experiment.

Jill: Next we ask your mom (or whomever you would choose) to follow you around for another two months and record not your words but your deeds. The aim is to find out whether you consistently follow the moral rules in William's moral code. My point is this: if you're like me, you will not succeed very well in following even your own moral precepts. And that says nothing about the undoubtedly much stricter rules that Christians say that God has laid down in, say, the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus. It is something close to that fact that I think Christians mean when they claim that we are all sinners.[11]

William: Okay, I still do not agree, but I think I understand the point a bit better. But I'm not seeing why this amounts to a reason to prefer that God exists.

Jill: I prefer that God exist because if God exists, our guilt can be assuaged. God can make our guilt objectively go away. He can forgive us.

William: So God removes a problem—human guilt—that is only real if God exists?

Jill: No, our guilt is a problem without even mentioning God. As I said, we don't even succeed in living up to our own moral standards. And God can forgive.

William: But the only people who are in a position to forgive a sin or fault are the people against whom the sin was committed. If some guy robs you

[11]This thought experiment is not original with me; it is based on something that I read or heard many years ago (perhaps it is from C. S. Lewis or Francis Shafer), but I can no longer recall to whom to attribute it.

of $100.00, I do not have the moral standing to forgive him, even if the thief repents and asks me to do so. Only you can do that.

Jill: That's true, but you're forgetting that Christianity teaches that all sins are sins against God, as well as of course against the victim. All sins are violations of God's law.

William: Hang on. If God does not exist, as I prefer, there *are no* sins against God, and so of course God cannot grant forgiveness. But sins committed against other humans (lying to someone, stealing from someone) would still remain. Those sins can be forgiven only by the injured party.

Jill: No, they would not remain. On my view, if there were no God there would be no sins of any kind because there would be no universe and no human beings.

William: I realize that this is the view of all theists. It is certainly not mine. But remember, we're asking which opinion about God—that God exists or does not exist—is preferable. I prefer a world just like this one and with no God; this is a coherent preference even if you are right that there could be no such world. If there is no God there is no guilt against God—that is what I prefer.

Jill: Okay, I certainly accept that if—*per impossibile*—there is no God and everything else remains the same, then there are also no sins against God. So it sounds as if I may have to give a little bit of ground on my fourth argument. But I still hold that there are no sins at all if God does not exist because if God does not exist nothing exists. Accordingly, what you are wishing for—a world just like this one but *sans* God—is, in my opinion, impossible. But what I think I now have to admit is that it is, so to speak, possible to prefer something that is impossible—like the student who prefers that Calculus or Quantum Theory be a lot simpler than they are.

William: I don't accept your claim that a world without God is impossible, but perhaps we had better move on to your fifth point.

Jill: It has to do with fear of death and the deep human desire to survive, to live on after death. I prefer that God exist because if God does not exist, and if (as you prefer and as I deny as impossible) the world could still exist, there is very little hope of our surviving death. I happen to regard all attempts at what we might call "technological survival of death" as, well, slightly ridiculous. If my clone lives on, it will be genetically identical to me, but it won't be me; if my body is frozen at death there is no good reason to think that people of the future will want to revive me even if they could; and a complete computer program of my brain state, even if implanted in an android that looks like me, will not in my opinion be me. But if an all-powerful God exists, God can ensure that we go on living after

death.[12] In fact, in Christianity (and many other religions), God promises that that will happen.

IV

William: Well, I can't argue against that point, since, honestly, I too would like to live forever. But I just want to point out that there is one after-life theory that on some versions of it (like in some schools of Buddhism and *Advaita Vedanta* Hinduism) is completely atheistic. This theory is of course reincarnation.

Jill: That's certainly true. We don't have time to argue about the philosophical merits of reincarnation. I'll just briefly say that I've never been convinced that the problem of personal identity in reincarnation can be solved, especially since neither the memory criterion nor the bodily criterion of personal identity is satisfied in putative cases of rebirth. Moreover, the very atheism of the theory (on its atheistic versions) presents a problem. How are karmic decisions made, or karmic consequences arrived at, apart from the existence of a personal God or karmic administrator? If there is a God, or gods, or a person of some sort, it is easy to imagine that being or beings saying to someone who has just died, "Okay, you were an evil merchant in Delhi in this previous life, but because of your bad karma I've now justly decided that you will be reborn as a beggar in Calcutta." That at least makes sense. But without any God or karmic administrator, I've never understood how such karmic "decisions" can be made. There can hardly be a natural law or set of natural laws that entail that a certain evil person will be reborn as a beggar in Calcutta as opposed to a leper in Mumbai. This picture is especially problematical since the idea in reincarnation is that such decisions are always entirely just and fair, never random or capricious.[13]

William: We don't talk much about reincarnation in American philosophy. I was just pointing out that survival of death does not strictly require God. But I admit that reincarnation does not seem particularly attractive to me.

Jill: Right. My main point about reincarnation was going to be just that—an endless or almost endless cycle of life, death, and rebirth, with all new incarnations based on karma from previous lives, is in my opinion not what you, and others who would prefer to live forever, are looking for.

William: Okay, I'll let reincarnation pass. But in response to your overall argument, I have to say that I'm not convinced. I'll take human autonomy over divine promises any day.

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[12]See my "Resurrection, Personal Identity, and the Will of God," in *Personal Identity and Resurrection: How Do We Survive Our Death?*, ed. Georg Gasser (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate 2010).

[13]See Chapter 11 ("Karma or Grace?") in my *Christian Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Jill: Yes, that's your position. And I'll opt for God's promises. But this raises a point that I've been worried about throughout our conversation. I suspect that the deepest reason that you prefer autonomy over God's promises is that you think those promises are empty because you don't believe in God. And the deepest reason that I prefer God's promises is that I think the benefits of autonomy are illusory (or at least slight) and I accept the trustworthiness of God's promises. In other words, our preferences do not stand alone, so to speak. They are influenced by our beliefs. I haven't done any scientific polling on this, but it's like what I said before: I think those who prefer that God exist tend to be theists and those who prefer autonomy over God tend to be atheists or agnostics. But here is a point I'm confused on: do our beliefs determine our preferences or is it the other way round?

William: It can't be the case that our preferences or wishes determine our beliefs, at least not always. I wish that terrorism around the world would stop within the next twenty-four hours, but I do not believe that that will happen.

Jill: That seems right.

William: Let's think about this for a minute. We've got four items: (1) our wishes or preferences; (2) our reasons for our preferences (to the extent that our preferences are based on reasons); (3) our beliefs; and (4) reality itself, what both our preferences and our beliefs are about or aim at. How are the four related? This is a complicated issue. I think some preferences are basic in the sense of not being based on reasons—such as the person you mentioned earlier who prefers steak over pizza. But some preferences *are* based on reasons such as my preference for diet cola over regular cola because I think it's better for me, or (to return to our topic) such as my preference that God not exist and your preference that God exist. We've been discussing our respective reasons. I would say that our preferences are normally based on our beliefs. Is it ever the case that our beliefs are based on our wishes? I would say that this surely happens, but it amounts to wishful thinking, at least so far as beliefs about God's existence are concerned.

Jill: Yes, it's been common ground among us that reality does not depend on our preferences. Just wishing something does not make it come true.

William: This is true. But there is one odd argument in the history of philosophy from William James that seems to push in the opposite direction. In his famous essay "The Will To Believe,"[14] the main argument is that in cases of "genuine options" (i.e., options that are living, forced, and momentous and where the evidence is balanced between two alternatives), people can justifiably decide which alternative to believe on non-epistemic

[14]William James, "The Will To Believe," *The Will To Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956), 23–25.

grounds. But James also briefly included in the essay the idea that belief can sometimes be self-verifying. This was clearly one of his pet ideas in his early essays (i.e., prior to his commitment to the pragmatic theory of truth in 1898). He gave this illustration: if I am attracted to a woman, my believing that she loves me can bring it about (or help bring it about) that she does love me. In another early essay, "The Sentiment of Rationality," he gave a different example: if a mountain climber is forced to try to jump across a chasm, the climber is more likely to succeed if he believes he will succeed than if he does not believe it.[15]

Jill: But what does this have to do with religion, which James was clearly talking about in "The Will To Believe"?

William: That's the puzzle. It is an example, of course, of a claim that I can be justified in believing on insufficient evidence. But surely my believing that God exits will not bring it about that God exists. Surely my believing that I will survive my death will not bring it about that I will survive my death. So I confess that I do not know why James included in his essay this bit about beliefs being self-verifying.

Jill: That *is* strange. Maybe James's idea has something to do with "the power of positive thinking." My brother is a physician, and he really believes that sick people are more likely to get well if they believe they are going to get well than if they don't.

William: That's an interesting suggestion. As you know, I coached my son's select soccer team for three years. And before a game, I never once tried to convince them that we were going to lose. I guess I implicitly thought our chances of winning were enhanced if the players *believed* we were going to win. The only trouble is that the areas in which "positive thinking" appears to work are very limited, and do not seem to include wishes or preferences or beliefs about God.

Jill: I just have the feeling that there are questions and issues here that we need to get straight, such as the relationship between our preferences and our beliefs. I think we agree that if our preferences in some sense cause our beliefs, that amounts to wishful thinking. At least in the case of God it would. Does that mean that our beliefs cause our preferences?

William: I don't know that it's a relationship of causation. In some sense our preferences had better be based upon our beliefs, at least in the area of God's existence. Obviously, everything will depend on precisely which belief we are talking about. As I said, I prefer that terrorism end soon, but I don't in fact believe that it will end soon. But, equally obviously, this preference does depend on some beliefs—e.g., my belief that a world free of terrorism would be better than a world with terrorism. My preference

[15] James, *The Will To Believe and Other Essays*, 96–97.

that God not exist is based on my belief that an atheistic world would be better than a theistic world.

Jill: There are issues here that I don't think we are going to be able to sort out. But, if it's okay with you, there is an addendum to my fifth point that I want to make. I think it tells in favor of preferring that God exist.

William: I'm all ears, but it looks as though we've got about seven minutes before we've got to head back to our building.

Jill: I can finish before then. As you know, I've been thinking a lot lately about genocide because of an essay that I'm working on for a volume to be edited by John Roth. I've actually been thinking about genocide and *hope*, although I know that those two words do not often appear together in the same sentence.

William: And this has something to do with preferring that God exists, right?

Jill: It does indeed. I'll state my main point first in case I do run out of time. My argument is vaguely Kantian: unless God exists, our grounds for hope in the face of the Holocaust and other genocides are limited indeed. If no creator or higher power such as the God of theism exists, the only hope that we can sensibly have, in my opinion, is tenuous and feeble. It would have to be the hope that some day we can design our educational, social, political, and diplomatic systems in such a way that no more acts of genocide occur. I suppose in some sense we can *hope* for that outcome, but given human nature and the religious and ethnic hatreds that we see in the world, it would be, again in my opinion, about like hoping that continental drift will cease.

William: But what does God have to do with this?

Jill: If God does not exist, there is no hope whatsoever for any experience of reparation, justice, or joy for the victims of genocide. They are dead and gone. That sort of hope makes sense only if God exists. If I were to hold that God does not exist, and if my assessment of human nature is such that murder and genocide can never be ruled out . . . well, that reasoning seems to me to lead to despair.

William: Much of what you say seems correct to me. But I still think that this life is all that there is, that my death is the end of me, and that I had best get on with the job of trying to live the best life that I can—which includes trying to do my small bit to prevent future murders and Holocausts. We live in a radically unjust world.

Jill: But I think most people have a deep longing for justice, and a hope that the world will turn out just. The reality of genocide in our world for me increases rather than decreases that hope. So I prefer that God exists because I want to hope, as Julian said, that all will be well.

William: I grant that some of the benefits that you have argued for are genuine goods, if God exists. But I still think autonomy is a more important good.

Jill: And I think the reverse.

William: We had better be going.

And so the two professors leave the student union for their meeting. Both hope that it will not be one of those all-too-common meetings of faculty members where the agenda is vague, nobody appears to be in charge, people can talk as long as they want about anything they want (whether germane to the point being discussed or not), and after an hour the only consensus is that no real conclusion was reached—well, other than the fact that they are accordingly going to have to meet again next week.[16]

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[16]I would like to thank Professors Scott Cormode, Matthew Davidson, Klaas Kraay, Dustin Locke, and Alex Rajczi for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I also wish to thank the Claremont Philosophers who attended the WIP (Work in Progress) session on this paper, as well as the editor and two anonymous referees of *Faith and Philosophy*.