

Does God Matter? Essays on the Axiological Consequences of Theism, edited by Klaas Kraay. Routledge, 2017. Pp. viii + 228. \$145 (hardcover).

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This book is about the normative impact of God's existence (the "axiology of theism"). It's specifically about *pro-theists*, who, roughly, think God's existence would be welcome, and *anti-theists*, who think otherwise. The sides wind up being more complex than this quick gloss suggests: for instance, one might think God's existence would increase the value of the world ("impersonal pro-theism") while still being bad for the people in it, or at least some of the people in it ("personal anti-theism"). The book is good, and apart from Hud Hudson's *A Grottesque in the Garden*, I think it's the only book in analytic philosophy devoted to this important question. I expect the axiology of theism to receive more attention in coming years, and this book will be a landmark in the expanding literature. In the interest of advancing the debate myself, I'll focus largely on providing critical comments, but these shouldn't overshadow this assessment.

The book contains eleven chapters by thirteen authors. Klaas Kraay's extremely helpful introduction aims not only at summarizing the other chapters but also at clarifying the question under discussion, noting some of the methodological issues which arise in answering it, mapping possible views one might take towards it, etc. The other pieces are divided into three sections: one on pro-theism, one on anti-theism, and one on "connections between the existential and axiological debates," i.e., connections between the axiology of theism and the question of whether or not God actually exists. I expect that many readers will (like me) initially be skeptical of anti-theism. So, I'll begin by discussing the anti-theistic arguments and will spend the most time on them.

Guy Kahane touched off the debate around the axiology of theism with his 2011 paper "Should We Want God to Exist?" Here, he argues that God's existence has certain inescapable drawbacks for us, while the main benefits of theism for us could, in principle, be obtained without God existing. This means that some atheistic worlds are preferable for us over any theistic worlds. (He thinks they might be preferable for us even if, due to the value of God's existence, impersonal pro-theism is true.)

Kahane thinks the main benefits of theism will include things like blissful immortality and post-mortem justice. He notes that these things might obtain even if God doesn't exist (e.g., through karma). Of course, theists might say that God makes available to us at least one benefit which couldn't obtain in any atheistic world: namely, relationship with an absolutely perfect being. Kahane's response is to note that "I don't myself find



the idea of such a relationship with a supreme being so appealing" (105) and that he doesn't expect other atheists to, either. Perhaps neither side is likely to convince the other. But Kahane does bring out an important lesson: to vindicate a pro-theism worth having, pro-theists may need to focus on goods which are *essentially* related to God, not merely various extrinsic goods which, in principle, might be obtained without God.

Meanwhile, Kahane's catalog of theistic drawbacks centers around the fact that in a theistic world, "we necessarily occupy a subordinate position in relation to a being that is vastly superior to us in every respect" (110). Resultant alleged problems include the fact that God would continually violate our privacy, that we would have to conform our lives to God's will and thereby "severely constrain our ability to live our lives according to our own plan," and that we would wind up "fairly low in the cosmic moral hierarchy," obligated to obey and worship God, and thus placed in a "deeply undignified" position (110–111). Kahane's argument for the badness of all this rests partly on an analogy with inegalitarian social relations between humans, such as those between slaves and masters (112–113). I share Kahane's socio-political judgments. But I think much of the reason why inegalitarian relations are unattractive among *us* rests on the moral equality which we share with each other (and, I think, with the other sentient animals) and which makes such relations inappropriate. I worry that regretting standing in such a hierarchy with someone who *really* is inherently superior to us evinces the kind of *envy* which egalitarian philosophers have rightly rejected as the basis for their views (cf. Elizabeth Anderson, "The Fundamental Disagreement Between Luck Egalitarians and Relational Egalitarians," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary vol. 36 [2012]: 1–23; Dustin Crummett, "Introduction to the Left," in *Ethics, Left and Right: The Moral Issues that Divide Us*, edited by Bob Fischer [Oxford University Press, forthcoming]).

(I'll note that Kahane's chapter might also have indirect implications for the problem of divine hiddenness. Even among people who want God to exist, knowledge of God might not serve God's purposes, if they want theism to be true only for extrinsic reasons and otherwise regard it as regrettable.)

Next, Stephen Maitzen argues that theism limits human inquiry, so that *epistemic* values support anti-theism. There are two stages. The first criticizes the claim that atheism would prevent our obtaining knowledge of the world. I question the choice of targets here. For instance, several pages are devoted to an obscure argument about the necessity of faith from the theologian R. M. Burns, while Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism (EAAN) gets only one footnote, and Maitzen's only response is to cite the 2002 volume *Naturalism Defeated*. But the EAAN has been refined, and new spin-off versions (such as ones focusing specifically on moral or metaphysical knowledge) have been created, since then.

The second part argues that theism places limits on the scope of human knowledge. Any worldview which makes certain purposes fundamental, rather than reducible to something non-teleological, involves "genuine

magic" (139). On naturalism, "any purpose has a purposeless, purely mechanistic explanation," which allows "human discovery to be limitless in depth." But on theism, intentional action sometimes achieves effects without any mechanism (e.g., God decides there will be light, and there is). Accordingly, when God produces an effect, there's "no way it occurs," and thus "no mechanism . . . that we could scrutinize ever more deeply" (140). So, on theism but not naturalism, some of the most important occurrences will be such that we cannot investigate how they happened.

I'm unconvinced. That an omnipotent being decides to bring something about is arguably a *more* intelligible explanation than any mechanistic one: the decision of the omnipotent being *entails* the effect, whereas, post-Hume, it seems mysterious why any mechanism causes the effects it does rather than any other, or none at all (Alvin Plantinga, "Laws, Cause, and Occasionalism," in *Reason and Faith: Themes from Richard Swinburne*, edited by Michael Bergmann and Jeff Brower [Oxford University Press, 2016], 126–144). Further, mechanisms run out at some point anyway. Plausibly, there are no mechanisms at the level of the fundamental particles; they just do their thing. So, ultimately all physical processes rest on events which are such that there is no way they come about. So, it seems to me that human inquiry can't really be "limitless in depth" by Maitzen's own standard.

In his chapter, Erik Wielenberg argues that life in a Christian universe is absurd, in that it would be impossible for most humans to be happy if they understood and accepted its entailments. He thinks Christianity makes life absurd because it entails what I elsewhere (2017) called a "strong sufferer-centered requirement on theodicy," i.e., it entails that God would not allow an undeserved, involuntarily undergone evil to befall someone unless it ultimately benefited them. Since any (undeserved, etc.) evil will benefit its sufferer, this gives us a reason to inflict suffering on others, which Wielenberg expects to have devastating psychological consequences. As he formalizes the argument:

1. Necessarily, if God exists, then whenever a person P experiences undeserved involuntary suffering, P is better off overall than P would have been without the suffering.
2. So: Necessarily, if God exists, then whenever a person A causes another person B to experience undeserved involuntary suffering, B is better off overall than B would have been without the suffering (from 1).
3. God's existence makes it true (or would make it true) that each of us is morally obligated to pursue the good of others.
4. Necessarily, if (i) A is morally obligated to pursue B's good and (ii) A's performing act X would make B better off overall, then (iii) A has a fact-relative reason to perform X.
5. So, God's existence makes it true (or would make it true) that C: each of us has a fact-relative reason to cause others to experience undeserved involuntary suffering (from 2, 3 and 4).

6. Most human beings are such that if they were to accept (C), they would experience negative psychological consequences that would make it difficult or impossible for them to be happy (without also failing to accept at least one entailment of (C)).
7. Therefore, the claim that God exists makes life absurd (from 5 and 6). (149–150)

I've also argued that the strong requirement has untoward moral implications, though ones somewhat different than those envisioned by Wielenberg ("Sufferer-Centered Requirements on Theodicy and All-Things-Considered Harms," *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* 8 [2017]: 71–95). So I'm sympathetic to parts of the general approach. But I have three objections to the argument as given here.

First, assuming a charitable interpretation of the strong sufferer-centered requirement, I doubt it entails that there's any reason to inflict suffering. For all it says, God might ensure that you suffer any time it will benefit you, regardless of what other agents do. (If they don't hurt you, maybe you suffer some natural evil.) It's then false that my victim would be worse off without my action, since they would have experienced other, equally efficacious suffering without it.

Second, the mere existence of *a* reason to do something isn't disturbing. That eating the people who pass by my house would provide me with a free source of complete protein is *a* reason to do it. But distress only comes when we think we have *all-things-considered* reason to do something. And it often happens that we would wrong someone through actions which benefit them, and therefore should not, all-things-considered, do the beneficial thing. (E.g., suppose someone has the right to know a painful truth, and the attendant pain will be non-voluntary since there is no way to get their consent to the pain without revealing the truth to them. Suppose lying is the only way to spare them, because they'll figure it out if we prevaricate. It might be wrong to lie to them, even if it's what's best for them.)

Why think (1) will ever result in our having *all-things-considered* reason to inflict suffering? Wielenberg (153) claims the "weightiness" of the reason means people will "often be forced to conclude that they have an actual moral obligation to inflict the suffering." But there are some weighty reasons which I am never obligated to act on—even obligated to never act on. Killing a random child would prevent the suffering of a lifetime's worth of pain and the commission of a lifetime's worth of wrongful acts, but it would be wrong on balance. Wielenberg elsewhere (161n11) suggests that God's forbidding us from inflicting beneficial suffering would introduce "incoherence (or at least oddness)" into Christian ethics, given the significance which Christian ethics places on beneficence. But I don't see why this is more odd than the fact that ordinary secular morality already prevents us from taking various beneficent courses of action, despite placing great significance on beneficence. I'm not sure that these

worries are conclusive, but I think this part of the argument needs further development.

The third, and from my perspective most significant, problem is that, as I've argued elsewhere, there's not much reason for a theist to accept the strong requirement to begin with. There are ways of respecting the anti-consequentialist motivations behind the strong requirement while avoiding its problems (Dustin Crummett, "Sufferer-Centered Requirements on Theodicy and All-Things-Considered Harms," *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* 8 [2017]: 71–95; Rebecca Chan and Dustin Crummett, "Moral Indulgences: When Offsetting is Wrong," *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* [forthcoming]). And as far as I know, it's not an entailment of any commonly accepted ethical theory. (Wielenberg [150] cites an argument from Stephen Maitzen in "Ordinary Morality Implies Atheism," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 2 [2009]: 107–126) claiming that allowing someone to suffer for reasons other than their own benefit would treat them as a mere means. But it might be that my suffering is not a means, but rather a foreseen side-effect, of something that benefits someone else.)

Final in the anti-theist section, Toby Betenson argues that impersonal anti-theism is implausible. But he also argues that what's rationally preferable for an agent sometimes comes apart from what would maximize the world's value, so that there's still room for personal anti-theism. This seems basically right.

Turning to the pro-theists: Scott Davison draws on his own account of intrinsic value to argue that God would have great intrinsic value. This is plausible, though I would have benefited from a clearer sense of Davison's target: anti-theists generally grant that God would possess great intrinsic value, but think theism would be regrettable for some other reason.

Michael Tooley's rich chapter covers a wide range of topics. He thinks the case for impersonal pro-theism is strong, but stronger from the perspective of an atheist than a theist. After all, it's open to an atheist, but not a theist, to say that the existence of God would result in a better world than the one we actually live in. Tooley also argues for the claims that the existence of God would not make the world worse in *any* respect and would not make anyone's life worse. However, he thinks defending these may require rethinking some of the characteristics usually assigned to God. For instance, Tooley is sympathetic to Kahane's claim that there would be something intrusive about God's knowing all our thoughts. But this should just lead us to conclude that God probably wouldn't be omniscient: God would only learn our thoughts when there was some overriding reason for doing so. Obviously, Tooley's arguments contain some controversial moves (e.g., he has to argue that God would not be necessarily omniscient), but there's much to think about even for those who disagree with many of Tooley's claims.

Finally, T. J. Mawson's chapter deals largely with the question of how to determine which is the closest (im)possible world in which the answer to the question of God's existence is different than it actually is. Mawson

winds up defending the claim that both theists and atheists should agree that God's existence does/would make the world no worse, and maybe at least somewhat better.

In the third section of the book, J. L. Schellenberg claims that "religious" forms of theism must portray God as axiologically and soteriologically "ultimate" in a way which implies that "God's existence . . . could not in any relevant way make a world or this world or someone's world—the world of someone's personal experience—worse than it would be if naturalism were true in this world" (183). (I wasn't sure about the argument for these assertions. Schellenberg [183] thinks they constitute a "'grammatical' claim about theistic religion," but this isn't evident to me.) This might provide a new argument from anti-theism to atheism, but Schellenberg concludes that such an argument will ultimately be parasitic upon the problem of evil.

In their chapter, Myron Penner and Ben Arbour make an argument similar to one made by Tooley. They think one can be an anti-theist or a proponent of the argument from evil, but probably not both: if God's existence would prevent the occurrence of large amounts of gratuitous evil, this would plausibly outweigh any negative consequences, such as loss of autonomy, pointed to by anti-theists.

Finally, Richard B. Davis and W. Paul Franks argue that Plantinga's free will defense is incompatible with his *felix culpa* theodicy. The free will defense posits that all creaturely essences might suffer from transworld depravity. However, Jesus has a creaturely essence, and therefore would himself suffer from transworld depravity, leaving him unable to do the atoning work posited by the *felix culpa* theodicy. I'd have preferred more discussion of the upshot of this. For instance, would we lose anything if we just modified the free will defense to claim that all creaturely essences *except Jesus's* are transworld depraved? That might be odd or ad hoc, but so was the original claim about transworld depravity, and all we need is logical possibility.

I'll close with a methodological note. The authors in this book approach the axiology of theism in the usual analytic way, as a matter for dispassionate analysis. (By contrast, Hudson's *Grotesque* certainly *doesn't* do this.) That's how I usually approach things, too, so I was surprised that I felt conflicted about it here. There's a general question about whether certain questions in philosophy concern issues which are so important or sensitive or sacred that it's somehow inappropriate to treat them in the usual analytic way. I wonder if, from the theistic and particularly the Christian perspective, this might be one of them. From that perspective, at least certain forms of anti-theism could be regarded as gravely dangerous and disrespectful—perhaps even, in a certain sense, *demonic*. Kahane himself thinks his conclusions are "blasphemous" if theism is true (122). And while he grants that servility to God "would, I assume, be appropriate" (113), and so wouldn't endorse Satanic rebellion, his reasons for finding theism unattractive are basically those traditionally attributed to Satan,

and parts of his chapter would be thematically at home in Book II of *Paradise Lost*. How, *morally*, should a Christian respond to a view like this? I'm not sure. Maybe the usual analytic approach is enough. But I found myself hoping that, as the literature on the axiology of theism expands, part of it will address the research ethics appropriate to the investigation. (I'm grateful to Liz Jackson for comments on an earlier version of this review.)

Faith and Humility, by Jonathan Kvanvig. Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. viii + 219. \$60.00 (hardcover).

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In *Faith and Humility*, Jonathan Kvanvig argues for an account of two virtues that balance, or provide correction for, each other: faith and humility. Faith is the disposition to act in service of an ideal, a disposition that remains despite difficulties or setbacks. One can, however, pursue distorted ideals or pursue them in the wrong way—with unquestioning zeal, for example. Humility, which helps to correct this extreme, is the disposition to attend to the value of one's aims and the extent of one's contribution toward accomplishing them. To establish these accounts, Kvanvig first argues for a method that directs his arguments, and he then develops the accounts as he articulates and responds to alternative views. In what follows, instead of summarizing the book chapter by chapter, I provide a summary of Kvanvig's positions and his arguments for them as they are eventually developed throughout the book.

In the first three-quarters of the book, Kvanvig gives an account of faith. His aim is to provide an account that applies across both religious and non-religious contexts by searching for faith worth having, employing an axiomatic approach rather than engaging in linguistic analysis, etymology, or an effort to discover the fundamental components of the world. The axiomatic approach, says Kvanvig, is what makes philosophy worth doing: "We can engage philosophically in an analysis of anything in the dictionary, but we don't, and the reason we don't, when it is justifying of our practice, is because we presuppose the value or importance or significance of what we focus on in our philosophical explorations" (25).

In the search for faith worth having, Kvanvig assumes that faith is a virtue, a trait of character that is characterized functionally, and asks what this trait is for, or why it is worth having. His answer is that faith provides structural unity to a life. Lives of faith are contrasted with lives that are wantonly disconnected, "just one damn thing after another" (16), or

