

ANTITHEISM AND GRATUITOUS EVIL

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Kahane introduces two versions of antitheism: impersonal and personal. I deny that impersonal antitheism can be cogently defended, but I accept that the meaningful life argument in favour of personal antitheism is sound. I then argue that the personal form of antitheism reduces to a form of gratuitous evil. Subsequently, I show that instead of denying the existence of gratuitous evil by approving sceptical theism, one can accept the existence of gratuitous evil and show that this sort of evil provides for a special sort of goodness. In line with this, I demonstrate that the existence of personal antitheists makes the world a more valuable place than a Godless world free of antitheists would be. The conclusion is that even for antitheists the existence of God is valuable, because they can thereby find a new meaning for their lives.

I. OUTLINE

Antitheism is an axiological thesis concerning the existence of God. Its general claim is that the world would be worse if God existed than if he did not. Its narrow personal version, which seems to be resilient in the face of objections, maintains that it would be worse in certain respects *for me* if God existed than if he did not. The main argument which proponents of the narrow personal version of antitheism cite in favour of their view is based on the idea that there could possibly be a person who in all relevant theistic worlds in which she exists has a life plan essentially related to her belief that she has a completely private inner world, and that without this belief her life would be meaningless. In this paper I argue that personal antitheism can be defended against several objections. I argue that the personal form of antitheism reduces to a form of gratuitous evil. I then try to show that instead of denying the existence of gratuitous evil by approving sceptical theism, one can accept the existence of gratuitous evil and show that this sort of evil provides for a special sort of goodness. In line with this, I then demonstrate that the existence of personal antitheists makes the world a more valuable place than a Godless world free of antitheists would be. I conclude that even for antitheists the existence of God is valuable, because they can thereby find a new meaning for their lives.

II. ANTITHEISM

In *The Last Word*, Tom Nagel says:

In speaking of the fear of religion, I don't mean to refer to the entirely reasonable hostility toward certain established religions and religious institutions, in virtue of their objectionable moral doctrines, social policies, and political influence. Nor am I referring to the association of many religious beliefs with superstition and the acceptance of evident empirical

falsehoods. I am talking about something much deeper—namely, the fear of religion itself. I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself: I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that.¹

Guy Kahane calls Nagel's view *antitheism*: the view that we should want God not to exist.² He offers a proof of a certain interpretation of Nagel's view, seeking thereby to demonstrate the coherence and rationality of antitheism. Atheists deny that God exists. Agnostics find no good reason to support belief in God and so stay unbelievers. There could be atheists who regret that God doesn't exist. There are also agnostics, life-long seekers perhaps, who desire or wish they could find evidence to support the belief that God exists. And there are also atheists who think that the existence of God is not compatible with the amount of evil and suffering in this world, and, since God is not good enough, the God described by theists does not exist. One could also believe in a supernatural deity who is not omniscient or omnipresent in the manner of Abraham's God. Contrary to all such views, antitheists claim that despite the Abrahamic God's supreme goodness and benevolence, it would be worse if He existed.³ Why do antitheists think it would be worse if God exists than if He does not? Kahane enumerates at least four reasons.

The idea is that God's existence is logically incompatible with the full realization of certain values. Thus a world in which God exists is a world where we would not be the moral equals of all other rational beings—equal members of a kingdom of ends that has no ruler. Such a world seems incompatible with complete independence, or with complete privacy and genuine solitude. And it might also be a world where it would be pointless for us to strive for a complete and unqualified understanding of the universe.⁴

Thus, he suggests that if God existed the world would be worse in certain respects: we would never have complete independence, complete privacy, genuine solitude, and complete understanding of the world. The truth of theism entails that some important propositions about God or ultimate reality cannot, in principle, ever be known; that we cannot be totally alone; that we cannot have completely private thoughts; and that we also lose moral autonomy, which we require in order to be responsible agents. These are referred to as 'axiological downsides' of God's existence.

This account of impersonal antitheism could be called into question. Each of the mentioned axiological downsides can be (and has been) challenged.⁵ For example, one could claim not only that it is not bad to be morally subordinate to another's rational authority, but indeed that morality requires the existence of a 'supreme Law-giver' under whom we autonomously subsume ourselves—in Kant's formulation, in conforming to the categorical imperative we subject our wills to the most perfect supreme lawgiver's will, namely the will of God. In being moral persons we subsume ourselves under the law of God, who is Good and has a Good will eternally.⁶

Regarding privacy, consider someone who is deciding whether to do an evil act. If she knows that God knows her evil plot and would not want her to do it, or may perhaps punish her in this world or the next as a consequence, this knowledge may block her from doing evil. We normally do not want to be seen as wicked in the eyes of observers, and certainly not in the eyes of those with whom we have strong personal relationships. Since we would be in the strongest existential relationship with God conceived as our Lord and creator and sustainer, it would be a very serious incentive to do good if we knew that he disapproved of our evil actions. Here I

might also cite the sympathy which an omnipresent and omniscient God would have for us during our lifetimes, such that whenever we needed to we could ask God, our nearest and best friend, to be with us, to help us, and to answer our petitionary prayers. He is not so insensitive that could not sense our pains and sufferings; rather, He suffers with us and knows our pains. If we know that someone else knows our pain and has sympathy with us, this itself gives us a form of patience and helps us to endure our pains. The insistence of religion on prayer reaches its full meaning only when we see God as not insensitive, but as one who responds to our broken hearts. As Pinnock says:

God risked suffering when he opened himself up to the world, when he made it possible for the creature to have an impact on him. God risked suffering when he decided to love and be loved by the creature. A lover's existence is inescapably affected by the other, especially when the loved one acts in ways that grieve and disappoint. Listen to the suffering in God's yearning for his wayward son: "Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him" (Jer 31:20 RSV). Obviously God feels the pain of broken relationships.⁷

The necessity of naturalism for understanding ultimate reality is also controversial. Notably, belief in the existence of God can help us to accept the contingency of the world as designed and created by a rational agent, and on that basis we would be led to rational acceptance of the existence of certain rules and natural laws for the physical world, in exploration of which we lay the foundations of modern science; in a naturalistic world, however, it is arguably difficult to substantiate the presupposition that the world emerges out of mere chaos. The value of supporting the presuppositions required for scientific inquiry is one of the axiological upsides of theism. Although it may be true that if we accept the existence of God we cannot ever understand ultimate reality, this is not so bad if it opens up a route towards research which is at least directed towards an ultimate truth whose existence we accept.

Next, consider ontological independence. It is claimed that in the Godly world we would enjoy less ontological or existential independence that we would otherwise sense in a naturalistic world. It is clear that in a Godless world we would still be ontologically dependent on physical states and laws. What Kahane could mean, perhaps, is that we would be made inferior creatures, debased and humble, by the debt we owe to God because of our creation and the gifts he has bestowed upon us. God's existence makes us slaves; whereas in a naturalistic world we are free agents who decide for ourselves independently and autonomously.

Again, I doubt that Kahane's ground here is as stable as he thinks it is. Suppose that by making us His slaves, God confers upon us a certain dignity, a sort of animal-transcendent and universal dignity that deserves respect to the extent that we must regard human beings not merely as a means to other ends. Because of our dependent souls, inspired by the divine spirit, we, all of us, become inspired and dignified by the divine sacred spirit and this is precisely the ground of our dignity, which belongs to all human beings regardless of their capabilities, functionalities, race or gender. In a Godly world we attain this important state by being God's dependent slaves.

We also depend on God at all times and in all places, so we lose our complete solitude; yet on the other hand we gain a firm connection and relationship with the Lord of Lords and the greatest being, in every moment in which we want to have a relation with Him. Some atheist philosophers argue that despite the goodness of being in such a state, God is so hidden that we cannot have a personal relationship with Him whenever we desire to be in such a relationship, and they conclude that God does not exist because this sort of hiddenness is contrary to His

benevolence and goodness.⁸ Whether or not one accepts the soundness of the hiddenness argument, its premise is itself a refutation of the solitude-oriented version of antitheism.

III. PERSONAL ANTITHEISM

Kahane also suggests that the world would be worse for certain persons if God existed, particularly those for whom striving for independence, understanding, privacy and solitude is essentially related to the meaning of their lives and their life-shaping goals.⁹ He says that:

If a striving for independence, understanding, privacy and solitude is so inextricably woven into my identity that its curtailment by God's existence would not merely make my life worse but rob it of meaning, then perhaps I can reasonably prefer that God not exists—reasonably treat God's existence as undesirable without having to think of it as impersonally bad or as merely setting back too many of my interests.¹⁰

Thus he suggests that if God exists the life of some rational agents would lose its meaning, and this would be far worse in some respects for them than it would otherwise be under naturalism. Kahane thinks that personal antitheism is easier to defend than the impersonal variant, since the existence of a benevolent and perfectly good God may otherwise outweigh such downsides as the compromising of privacy or independence. There are a number of theodicies or defenses available for theists on this point, some of them I mentioned above. However, it seems difficult to use them in response to personal antitheism because theodicies mainly support a sort of consequentialist or utilitarian view, aimed at proving an overall benefit of the existence of God, and scarcely touch on each individual's interests and goals. On the other hand, a non-consequentialist response, which demands that one sacrifice one's own interests and goals in favour of an overall benefit, seems too demanding. So it seems it is difficult to deny that it would be far worse *for that person* whose life would lose its meaning should the downsides which are the inevitable consequences of God's existence be actualized.

To answer personal antitheism thus requires more scrutiny. Myron Penner has called Kahane's argument in favour of personal antitheism the *Meaningful Life Argument*, and sets it out as follows:

1. If God's existence would constrain or prevent S from obtaining some of the goods in Ms, then God's existence would constrain or prevent S from obtaining what she thinks is a meaningful life.
2. If God's existence would constrain or prevent S from obtaining what she thinks is a meaningful life, then it's rational for S to prefer that God doesn't exist.
3. So, if God's existence would constrain or prevent S from obtaining some of the goods in Ms, then it's rational for S to prefer that God doesn't exist.
4. God's existence would constrain or prevent S from obtaining some of goods in Ms.
5. Thus, it's rational for S to prefer that God doesn't exist.¹¹

(Where Ms refers to a set of subjective moral goods the obtaining or pursuing elements of which is essential for the life of some moral agents to become meaningful.) Premise (1) is obtained from the definition of Ms. Premise (2) has been challenged by Penner, on the basis of what he calls a fallibility objection based on a distinction between objective and subjective moral goods. He argues that because premise (2) refers to subjective and fallible judgments about what constitutes the meaningful life, so 'even granting premise (2) according to which God's existence

might make it internally rational for S to prefer that God not exists because God's existence prevents S from achieving what she *thinks* will constitute a meaningful life, this is no guarantee that God's existence would *actually* prevent S from obtaining a meaningful life' (p.335). It seems to me, however, that the main constituent of having a good and meaningful life is exactly the thought that we have a good and meaningful life. If one thinks that she has lost the essential constituent of her life's meaning, then she actually has been prevented from having a meaningful life. So I think internal rationality is enough for the proponent of antitheism to establish her claim.

Penner's other objection concerns premise (4). He tries to show that the downsides which happen for certain persons if God exists would prevent their pursuing important goals only when independence, understanding, privacy and solitude are expected to be experienced to an ultimate degree. He argues that 'there are good reasons to think that when it comes to these particular goods, it is better to experience them in proximate, restricted degrees as opposed to experiencing them in an ultimate, unrestricted way.' (p.336) He then tries to set out the reasons that support his thought. His proposed good reasons to support the idea that Kahane's mentioned values should not be expected to be obtained in an unrestricted and ultimate form are in a form of theodicy, and so could not be applied to the personal version of antitheism. But, regardless of his success in proposing convincing reasons in support of his idea, the proponent of antitheism can still insist on the claim that for some persons there are some values the full and ultimate obtaining of which is essential for those persons' lives to be meaningful. So an antitheist can still maintain that there are life-meaning-bestowing subjective values whose obtaining is incompatible with God's existence.

IV. PERSONAL ANTITHEISM AND GRATUITOUS EVIL

It thus seems that the personal antitheist argument is not only valid but indeed sound. Why, then, I am not an antitheist? I maintain my opposition to this view because I think antitheism in its personal form reduces to a type of the evidential or inductive problem of evil. Consider a person whose life would become meaningless if he tentatively thought that God exists. Accordingly, he prefers that God doesn't exist. Kahane suggests that God could prevent this person from such a life-meaning-eradicating thought by, for example, imparting to him Penner's thoughts about the benefit of obtaining restricted values rather than unlimited values. God also could emerge from hiddenness such that the person would come to believe firmly in God's existence: it would then be difficult for him to arrange his life so that his life plan depended on the obtaining of such unlimited values as full independence or complete privacy. As Kahane says,

It's plausible that a main reason why people adopt such projects is that they do not believe God exists. (Can the value of, say, privacy or independence be fully appreciated in the shadow of the belief in the constant presence and authority of God? Perhaps the decline of religious belief in the West is what has made it possible for us to fully appreciate certain values—values that would be compromised precisely if religious belief is correct) (2011, p.692).

So the benevolent God has many ways to prevent the existence of persons who can rationally hope for His non-existence. God could adopt general ways and purposes that are compatible with evil states that include the existence of such persons, but because the goodness of God's general ways and purposes outweighs the badness of the existence of such evils from an overall perspective, God's existence can be seen as compatible with the existence of such evils. However, in the case of the personal antitheist none of the general theodicies or defenses would

work out, since the question now is what necessitates that the benevolent God does not prevent the existence of such evils. It seems that, if God exists, the existence of personal antitheist is a *gratuitous evil*.

At the end of the day, the opponent of the evidential problem of evil rejects the existence of gratuitous evil, and similarly here the opponent of antitheism has to reject the existence of life-meaning-bestowing values which are incompatible with the existence of God. Contrary to both, I accept the possibility of the existence of gratuitous evil and the existence of persons who are internally rational in hoping and preferring that God doesn't exist. So I think the meaningful life argument is sound. But the important point is that instead of denying the existence of gratuitous evil through arguing in favour of sceptical theism, the thesis that we don't know of any outweighing goods thanks to which God permits the evil, we can accept their possible existence and then find a way to show that *gratuitous evil itself is a good*. Accordingly, I shall show that the existence of personal antitheism is itself a good, and so that the existence of God will enhance the value of the world from an axiological point of view.

Gratuitous evil is a kind of evil which on reflection we can see no good reason for God's permission of it. It is a kind of evil which seems pointless and avoidable. Could it be good that we were in a state such that we do not know of any good reason on the basis of which to defend God? Is it good that there could be some persons who think (truly or not) that if there is a God their life will lose its meaning? To answer these questions I refer to two stories in the Bible: the story of Lot, and the story of Job. In the story of Lot, Abraham pleads for Sodom. With genuine humility and real admiration, Abraham asks God 'What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it?' (Genesis 18:24); and he boldly presses his negotiations: 'then Abraham made one last effort to reduce it by ten more and said: May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there? And God answered positively: For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it' (Genesis 18:32). The reason Abraham can appeal to God's righteousness is because he is thinking that there could be gratuitous evil, and is pleading with God to prevent it. The process of bargaining is, I think, only possible if we can be in a state such that we can think that gratuitous evil is possible. So God, by permitting us to be in a situation such that upon enough reflection we cannot find a way to know God's reasons, actually makes it possible for us to bargain, implore and plea for His special mercy and attention.

In the story of Job the same interpretation can be offered. Contrary to many contemporary readings of Job I don't think that the story confirms the truth of sceptical theism, but rather says more than this. It says that it is good that in some situations we should complain, like Job, that we don't know God's ways. This unknowingness opens a new way to plea to God and even to complain to Him, by asking why He has permitted us to be in such an evil state.

As I see it, the same story can be developed as regards the existence of the personal antitheist. The personal antitheist thinks that her privacy, solitude, independence and moral autonomy have been constrained by the existence of God to the extent that she loses her life goals, and so desires God not exist. She complains about the existence of God. She rebels against God. These complaints and rebellions, I propose, shape her life and give her life new meaning. Consider Jean-Paul Sartre or Nietzsche, who rebelled against God or responded with indignation to His perceived indiscretions. This rebellion gave a new meaning to their lives. The world containing Sartre and Nietzsche seems to be more valuable than the world without them. But what made them what they were, is the Lord's transcendence and hiddenness, which allowed them to be in a situation such that they dared to rebel against God.

V. CONCLUSION

I have shown that while the impersonal version of antitheism cannot be cogently defended, its personal version is resistant to objections. I argued that the personal form of antitheism reduces to a form of gratuitous evil, and then tried to show that instead of denying the existence of gratuitous evil by approving sceptical theism, one can accept the existence of gratuitous evil and show that this sort of evil provides for a special sort of goodness. In the same way, I suggested that the existence of the personal antitheist makes the world a more valuable place than a Godless world free of antitheists. Therefore theism has axiological value even for antitheists, because it gives them the possibility to find new meaning for their lives.

Notes

1 Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 130.

2 Guy Kahane, 'Should We Want God to Exist?' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 82:3 (2011): pp. 674–96.

3 Abraham's God is a being who is perfectly good, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, and the creator and sustainer of the universe. This conception of God I think is the classical conception of God in all theistic religions. Kahane also utilizes this conception.

4 Kahane, 'Should We Want God to Exist?' p. 682.

5 See Klaas J. Kraay, 'On Preferring God's Non-Existence,' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 43(2013): pp. 157–78; Myron A. Penner, 'Personal Anti-Theism and the Meaningful Life Argument,' *Faith and Philosophy* 32:3 (2015), pp. 325–337; Stephen T. Davis, 'On Preferring that God Not Exist (Or that God exist): A Dialogue,' *Faith and Philosophy* 31:2 (2014), pp. 143–159.

6 Kant says: 'Morality thus leads ineluctably to religion, through which it extends itself to the idea of a powerful moral Lawgiver, outside of mankind, for Whose will that is the final end (of creation) which at the same time can and ought to be man's final end.' *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, translated by T. M. Green and H. H. Hudson (Harper, NY: 1960), p. 19.

7 Clark Pinnock, 'Systematic Theology,' in Clark Pinnock et al. (eds.) *The Openness of God* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1994), p.119.

8 John Schellenberg is the most famous philosopher to have introduced this type of hiddenness argument against God. There is an extensive literature on this argument, and I do not want to enter into this debate here. I have argued elsewhere that this argument is not sound, see Ebrahim Azadegan, 'Divine Love and the Argument from Divine Hiddenness,' *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 6:2 (2014), pp. 101–116. For an introductory text, see John J. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 2015).

9 He also distinguishes between the world being worse in certain respects and the world being worse overall. However, he is not persuaded by the reason for the belief that if God exists the world would be worse overall from an impersonal point of view. For more details on this distinction and possible objections to each version of antitheism, see Klaas J. Kraay, 'On Preferring God's Non-Existence'.

10 Kahane, 'Should We Want God to Exist?' p.691.

11 Penner, 'Personal Anti-Theism and the Meaningful Life Argument' p.328.