

## Appraising Objections to Practical Apatheism

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### Introduction

Contemporary debates in philosophy of religion almost always focus on questions about God's existence. Does God exist? Is it rational to believe God exists? Can we know whether or not God exists? What would count as evidence for God's existence? Call these questions and their close variants *Existence Questions* (EQs). Historically, EQs have been central not only to philosophy of religion but also to philosophy in general, and presently, they are often a staple of introductory philosophy courses. But while there is little doubt that philosophers often regard EQs as important philosophical questions, it is worth considering whether these questions really warrant this status and whether they should be regarded as similarly significant by non-philosophers. The significance of EQs is worth exploring because it sheds light on the value of philosophical exploration of these issues: we gain a better understanding of what is at stake in the relevant debates and how much may hinge on how we answer these questions. Additionally, if EQs turn out to be relatively unimportant, then some form of *apatheism* – a general attitude of apathy or indifference regarding how we answer EQs – may emerge as the proper attitude regarding claims about God's existence.

In this paper, we consider the practical significance of our answers to EQs – the ways in which how we answer EQs might have a significant impact on how we live. We investigate whether there are compelling reasons to reject *practical apatheism* – an attitude of apathy or indifference to EQs rooted in the belief that their answers lack practical significance. It is possible that the practical insignificance of EQs could influence the nature of philosophical debates about EQs: If our answers to EQs lack practical significance, then perhaps they warrant less philosophical attention, and perhaps debates concerning them should be more carefree because the stakes are not as high as most believe.<sup>1</sup> But our focus here is not on the implications for philosophy of religion if apatheism were shown to be an appropriate outlook on EQs. Instead, we investigate the position and determine whether there are decisive reasons to reject it.

We have two main tasks in this paper. First, we clarify our understanding of practical apatheism, distinguishing it from other forms of apatheism and from other views in philosophy of religion. Second, we critically examine the following reasons that one could offer for thinking EQs are practically significant:

1. EQs are practically significant because we cannot develop a satisfactory objective ethical system unless God exists.
2. EQs are practically significant because we cannot be motivated to behave ethically unless God exists.

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<sup>1</sup> Assuming that practical apatheism were the appropriate attitude to take toward EQs, whether EQs would therefore deserve less philosophical attention depends significantly on one's views regarding how the practical significance of a topic of inquiry should affect its worthiness of being examined. Some may argue, for instance, that the question of whether the external world exists is a topic worthy of philosophical examination even if how we answer it has no impact on how we live. In this paper, we take no stand on the relationship between an issue's practical significance and its all-things-considered philosophical importance. As we discuss in the following section, we leave open the possibility that there can be worthwhile *intellectual* reasons for pursuing topics of inquiry that lack practical significance.

3. EQs are practically significant because we cannot live meaningful lives unless God exists.
4. EQs are practically significant because of the historical prominence of philosophical positions tied to how EQs are answered.
5. EQs are practically significant because answering them correctly increases the likelihood that one will experience a miracle.
6. EQs are practically significant because how we answer them affects our fates in the afterlife.

Each of these reasons can be taken as an independent objection to practical atheism: they each strive to demonstrate that EQs are practically significant and that an apathetic attitude toward them is therefore rationally indefensible. We ultimately argue that the first five of these objections do not offer good reasons to reject atheism. Only the objection that links EQs to our fates after death is potentially promising, and it still encounters formidable obstacles.

If our analysis is accurate, then just as it is controversial whether we can survive death, it should be similarly controversial whether or not practical atheism is a reasonable attitude to hold regarding EQs. Thus, practical atheism deserves greater philosophical attention and cannot be casually dismissed in discussions of EQs.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> One might worry that even if we adequately appraise these six objections to practical atheism, there might still be other objections that offer more decisive reasons to reject the view. While this concern is understandable, no single paper could address every possible objection to practical atheism. Given that atheism (in any form) is a rather underexplored philosophical position, we must begin with the objections that already have a firm basis in the literature and proceed from there.

## Apatheism

Apatheism is seldom mentioned in philosophical work and almost never described in detail. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2009, p. xvii) and Milenko Budimir (2008) are perhaps the only professional philosophers to use the term explicitly in their writings.<sup>3</sup> The term is so infrequently used that its most detailed examination originates in a magazine article in *The Atlantic* (Rauch 2003). In this section, we present a brief overview of apatheism to give readers a clear understanding of its features, its implications, and how it differs from the more established views in philosophy of religion. We also distinguish between practical apatheism and intellectual apatheism. In subsequent sections, practical apatheism will be our sole focus.

Apatheism has two key features. First, as the name suggests, apatheism refers to an attitude of apathy toward God and supernatural beliefs. An apatheist is not particularly concerned about whether her answers to EQs are correct. Second, apatheism is distinct from theism, atheism, and agnosticism. A theist believes that God exists; an atheist believes that God does not exist; an agnostic believes that we cannot know whether God exists; an apatheist believes that we should not care whether God exists. Apatheism is orthogonal to these other positions: whether one is a theist, atheist, or agnostic does not logically entail that one must be an apatheist or an anti-apatheist. Many theists do believe that whether God exists is important and would reject apatheism, but this not a logical requirement of theism.<sup>4</sup> It should be acknowledged, however, that the extent to which apatheism and theism form a

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<sup>3</sup> Some philosophers have addressed a position similar in spirit to apatheism. Guy Kahane (2011), for instance, briefly discusses whether an indifferent attitude toward God's existence could be justified (pp. 677-678), though it is not clear that this attitude precisely captures apatheism as we have defined it. Similarly, Kraay and Dragos (2013) briefly discuss indifferentism – “the claim that *it would neither be far better nor far worse if God exists*” (p. 158; original emphasis). Indifferentism is a claim about how the value of the universe is impacted by God's existence, and clearly, it is much different than apatheism. It is perfectly coherent for someone to think the universe as a whole would be better (or worse) if God exists and thereby reject indifferentism while also holding that this fact about the universe's value does not matter for her as an individual and therefore does not make her concerned about EQs.

<sup>4</sup> As we will address in a later section, however, we doubt that an apatheist who believes in God will be able to endorse traditional theistic beliefs about the afterlife.

coherent union may depend on the views that one takes towards God's nature or attributes. For instance, Christian universalists, who believe that all human beings will ultimately experience divine salvation in the afterlife, will probably be more sympathetic to apatheism than one who thinks eternal divine punishment is possible. Similarly, one who believes in an impersonal God who does not intervene in human affairs may find apatheism more appealing than those who believe in a God who does intervene in human affairs.

In practice, even though being an apatheist does not entail abandoning theism, apatheism will probably appear more attractive to atheists and agnostics because they generally do not structure their lives around religious beliefs in the way that theists do. Of course, one could also be an atheist or agnostic and reject apatheism. Many atheists who write passionately about the topic of God's existence probably hold this view: they believe that the topic of God's existence is very important even though they do not believe such a being exists. Agnostics could similarly reject apatheism, though that would probably result in frustration or despair: one would believe that EQs are important and worth trying to answer while also believing that we cannot know their answers.

Thus far, we have focused on apatheism *in a broad sense* – an all-things-considered attitude of apathy toward EQs. We now want to distinguish between two narrower types of apatheism: *practical* apatheism and *intellectual* apatheism. Practical apatheism is an attitude of apathy or indifference toward EQs grounded in the belief that their answers lack practical significance. Intellectual apatheism is an attitude of apathy or indifference toward EQs grounded in the belief that there are no compelling intellectual reasons to investigate EQs. These views can overlap, and an all-things-considered apatheist would have to hold both positions. But they can also come apart: it is possible to be a practical apatheist but reject intellectual apatheism and vice-versa. It is possible, for example, to say that one is apathetic

about EQs with respect to their practical significance but also believe that there can be worthwhile intellectual reasons to ponder them. Similarly, one could hold that there are no compelling intellectual reasons to examine EQs but that there are important practical reasons for doing so. From this point forward, our focus will be exclusively on practical atheism. We will not address whether intellectual atheism is an appropriate attitude to adopt regarding EQs, although as some of our remarks elsewhere indicate, we suspect it would be much more difficult to defend intellectual atheism than practical atheism.

This distinction between practical atheism and intellectual atheism plays an important role in our analysis because it provides a means of bypassing certain reasons that one might posit for examining EQs. For instance, answering EQs may shed light on how we can explain the existence of the universe. God's existence might help explain what the universe was like before the Big Bang or why subatomic particles sporadically pop in and out of existence. But understanding the universe's origins holds little practical significance here and now: this is an intellectual reason to care about EQs, and thinking that EQs are worth studying for this reason is perfectly compatible with believing that their answers lack practical significance. Practical atheism does not forbid people from examining questions for intellectual reasons and does not require that one view such inquiries as a waste of time. In fact, this combination of beliefs probably mirrors how many philosophers perceive other philosophical questions. It seems doubtful, for instance, that the absence of a proof of the external world would immediately cause a radical change in how a person lives her life, but she may still derive enjoyment from trying to develop such a proof and find the activity worthwhile.

Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that practical atheism cannot *always* be an appropriate attitude to adopt toward EQs. It is too easy to craft counterexamples to such an

extreme position. Imagine a scientist whose reputation and livelihood are in part tied to his investigations into the origin of the universe or an assistant professor who has specialized in EQs and who needs to publish in preparation for tenure review or a priest whose livelihood depends on interest in EQs. For such individuals, practical atheism would be irrational and inappropriate. But even if there are exceptions, one can still sensibly ask whether atheism is *prima facie* an appropriate attitude to adopt toward EQs. In subsequent sections, we are considering objections to this type of practical atheism, not its more extreme variant.

With a basic understanding of atheism in hand, we can now turn to the main task of the paper – appraising six objections to practical atheism that come readily to mind. We begin with some potential connections between EQs and morality.

### **Moral Objectivity**

One might think that EQs are important because God is necessary for morality to be objective. Some philosophers, such as Robert Adams (1987) and Phillip Quinn (1978), argue that objective moral principles demand a divine or religious basis. On this account, the general prohibitions on killing, stealing, lying, and so on are only arbitrarily grounded without the prescriptive force of a divine authority. If this position is correct, then EQs are important because they give us insight into the moral nature of our universe. Is God the source of moral authority, or must objectivity be found elsewhere? And if God is not the source of moral authority, can there be an objective basis for ethics at all?

The practical atheist has two promising means of replying to this worry. The first strategy is to note that contemporary moral philosophy has become decidedly secular. There are many proposed moral systems that rely on objectivity grounded in something other than God or religion. In his *Summa Theologica*, in spite of its ultimately religious purposes,

Thomas Aquinas (1920) argues for an objective moral system based on reason, a trait universal to humanity. Consequentialist approaches to morality ground objectivity by comparing possible states of affairs and demanding that we bring about whichever possible state of affairs is best, often in terms of total welfare. Immanuel Kant's non-consequentialist approach is based on the notion that moral requirements originate from a standard of rationality known as the Categorical Imperative. Since the Categorical Imperative is binding on all rational beings, it is an objective demand on one's behavior so long as the person is a rational agent. While Kantianism and consequentialism are perhaps the most well-known ethical theories, they do not exhaust the possibilities. For instance, Louis Pojman (2007) argues for an objective morality based on our common humanity, and Kai Nielsen (1964) offers a godless, objective morality based on the reality of man as a social animal in a *community*, a concept that "implies binding principles and regulations" (p. 59). Our self-interest, Nielsen argues, demands a tool to mediate social conflict, and morality is that tool. This list could continue almost indefinitely, but further examples should not be necessary to illustrate the central point: there are many avenues for establishing an objective ethical system that do not rely on God or religion.

The practical atheist's second means of reply arises from reflection upon one of the long-term goals of ethical inquiry – the discovery of a moral code that could be rationally endorsed by everyone. Religious pluralism provides a strong reason to be skeptical that any religious ethic could serve as the foundation for a universally accepted moral code. If achieving a broad moral consensus about right and wrong is desirable, then religious-based morality seems ill suited for this project because of the different ethical mandates contained in each religion and the often volatile fervency of religious disagreement. Some similarities exist, such as the near universal endorsement of the Golden Rule (Hick 1992), but the

differences are still more than sufficient to divide religious communities. In fact, any attempt to ground ethics in a single set of religious beliefs would almost surely undermine the potential for creating a stable democratic society. Such societies are, after all, characterized by a plurality of incompatible religious doctrines, and the presence of these competing worldviews seems inevitable unless minority views are systematically oppressed. Thus, one might want to follow John Rawls (1993) and try to develop a moral and political system that is compatible with pervasive and reasonable disagreement within society. In any case, the quest to develop a universal morality that embraces humanity as a single moral community is better addressed by secular efforts.

These two considerations are decisive reasons to reject the claim that God's existence is required for the development of a suitable objective ethic or set of ethical principles. In fact, religious pluralism suggests that the development of a universal ethical system must, in the absence of an extremely dominant and oppressive theocracy, be a secular endeavor.

### **Moral Motivation**

Concerns about the link between EQs and morality are not limited to the objectivity of ethics, however. God's presence is often thought to play a crucial role in promoting moral behavior. Even if the formation of objective moral principles is possible without any reference to God, one may fear that individuals are left with no motivation to act ethically unless divine sanctions are present. This objection warrants several responses.

First, the motivation to act morally can be derived from the motivation to act in one's self-interest. Reconciling morality and self-interest might be an impossible task if we are trying to convince the most hardened moral skeptic, but it proves less difficult if our audience consists in rational individuals who are sensitive to moral emotions and motivations.

Borrowing a maneuver from Gregory Kavka (2007), we can bring morality and self-interest into alignment for these individuals if we consider the effects of both external sanctions and internal sanctions. External sanctions may include punishment or social rejection for wrongdoing as well as rewards for acting kindly (e.g., philanthropic awards, reciprocal favors from others). Internal sanctions, in contrast, refer to our individual psychological reactions to our deeds. These may include guilt or shame for acting wrongly as well as “the agreeable feelings that typically accompany moral action and the realization that one has acted rightly, justly, or benevolently” (Kavka 2007, p. 106). Undoubtedly, there are some individuals who do not feel any guilt at doing wrong or any gratification in doing right, but fortunately, these individuals are rare. For the overwhelming majority of people, it is rational to adopt a moral way of life because they will be happier doing so than acting immorally whenever they believe they can evade external sanctions. Thus, for those with even the most minimal moral sensibilities, their long-term self-interest will be furthered by trying to act ethically.

Furthermore, a flourishing human life requires a certain degree of concern for others, even for those who are skeptical of God’s existence. A truly egoistic existence leaves one vulnerable to feelings of deep sadness and frustration whenever one endures personal failures or hardships. Nearing death is a particularly acute hardship in this respect: if one is truly egoistic, then everything that one values threatens to be annihilated when one dies. To reliably avoid despair, we must achieve self-transcendence – the state of valuing others independent of their usefulness to promoting our own welfare.<sup>5</sup> Genuinely valuing friends, family, collective humanity, and nonhuman nature (among other things) enables us to retain hope even when our own lives are faring poorly, and we can take solace in knowing that not everything we value will cease to exist when we die. In this manner, unless one is able to live

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<sup>5</sup> For more detailed presentations of the main argument in this paragraph and the concept of self-transcendence more generally, see Partridge (1981) and Nolt (2010).

a remarkably lucky life (i.e., one devoid of significant personal failures or problems) and die abruptly before old age (thereby avoiding a confrontation with death), caring about others is an essential part of human flourishing. Since genuinely valuing others requires caring about others' welfare independent of how it contributes to our own and acting in accordance with our concern for their welfare, achieving self-transcendence requires (at a minimum) the adoption of certain basic ethical principles regarding how others ought to be treated.

Moreover, since it is not possible to develop genuine self-transcendence in a short time, its cultivation must be an ongoing lifelong project if it is to be an effective means of avoiding despair. Again, we see that valuing and behaving in ethical ways contributes to the long-term self-interests of nearly everyone. Thus, the claim that motivation to act ethically must be based on divine punishment for wrongdoing is incorrect.

Moreover, ethical precepts rooted in divinity often motivate individuals to engage in behavior that is clearly unethical. The holy texts of major world religions – including the dominant holy text of Western civilization, the Bible – are filled with endorsements (often directly from the mouth of God) of morally questionable or morally impermissible actions as well as proof-texts used routinely to justify bigotry, discrimination, and violence.<sup>6</sup> One can appeal to these passages to justify infanticide, genocide, war based on religious or cultural differences, slavery, and pernicious discrimination against women, nonbelievers, and homosexuals. World history, with its religious conquests and theocratic oppression, further demonstrates that religious morality has often failed to incentivize people to act in the kind, cooperative ways that any plausible ethic would require (Nielsen 1964).

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<sup>6</sup> Just in the Bible, one can find justifications of the following behaviors: attempted human sacrifice (Genesis 22), murder over religious differences (Deuteronomy 13), murder and rape (Numbers 31, Deuteronomy 20, Judges 21), the tacit approval of slavery (Ephesians 6), and administration of capital punishment for the following activities: witchcraft (Exodus 22), homosexual acts (Leviticus 20), adultery (Leviticus 20), and women losing their virginity before their wedding night (Deuteronomy 22).

There remains, however, one more worry about moral motivation worth acknowledging: the possibility that God's elimination of gratuitous evil might undermine moral motivation. Roughly, gratuitous evil refers to evil that does not further God's plan for creation, whatever that plan might be. William Hasker (1992; 2004b, chs. 4 and 5) has argued that God, if he were to prevent all gratuitous evil, would severely limit our moral freedom, since he would eliminate all evils that cause extreme harms without resulting in some greater good. The value of free will might hold enough value to justify permitting *some* gratuitous evil, but it would be implausible, Hasker (1992) thinks, "to say that the evil of a deliberate murder is outweighed by the inherent value of the exercise of free will by which the murder was decided on!" (p. 32). Thus, our exercise of moral freedom would be limited to a fairly narrow range of low-stakes choices: in this manner, God "would be running a sort of moral kindergarten, permitting us to develop our characters by arguing over the blocks, but stepping in to intervene before anyone actually gets hurt" (Hasker 1992, p. 32). If this were the case, then our moral motivation might be undercut by the knowledge that it would be impossible for us to commit gratuitous evils with any great costs. If it is a necessary truth that God prevents gratuitous evils (given God's nature), then one might think that this concern about moral motivation provides a reason to care about EQs.

Hasker's line of reasoning about moral motivation has been criticized elsewhere on several occasions (Rowe 1991, pp. 79-86; Chrzan 1994; O'Connor 1998, pp. 53-70; Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder 1999, pp. 119-127), but the most straightforward problem is that Hasker's argument rests on an empirical claim that is not adequately supported. Whether believing that God prevents all gratuitous evil actually undercuts people's moral motivations can only be determined by studying the behavior of theists who hold this belief. Hasker even acknowledges that some theists do *not* have their moral motivation undermined by their

belief, but he dismisses this fact by claiming that such theists simply fail to recognize and properly appreciate the inconsistent aspects of their worldview (Hasker 1997, p. 392; 2004a, p. 87). But this response isn't adequate: Hasker assumes that a failure to properly diagnose an inconsistent set of beliefs and act accordingly entirely explains these theists' behavior without providing any psychological evidence that this explanation is accurate.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, he greatly overestimates the effects that abstract ideas typically have on moral behavior.

*Explanations* of moral motivation may shift according to how we answer EQs and EQ-adjacent questions, but ideas have a limited influence on moral motivation in practice because moral motivation is more fundamental to human life than careful, rational deliberation about abstract concepts.<sup>8</sup> Some have characterized it as a genetically predetermined, collective illusion (Ruse 2007) – the result of a hundred-thousand plus years of the evolution of human cooperation and empathy, and one that we would all share even in the absence of religious mandates or carefully constructed secular moral systems. Others have highlighted how moral actions and judgments are quick, automatic, and intuitive, leaving little room and little need for rational deliberation to motivate the moral action or judgment.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, there is no persuasive evidence that a belief that God prevents gratuitous evil will undermine one's moral motivation.

God's existence is sometimes held to be essential for motivating individuals to engage in satisfactory moral behavior, but grounding ethics in divinity is actually neither necessary nor sufficient for promoting satisfactory moral behavior. Consequently, verdicts about EQs

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<sup>7</sup> Kraay (n.d., pp. 7-8) makes a similar criticism of Hasker's response.

<sup>8</sup> This observation also explains in part why a shift from theism to atheism is unlikely to impact moral motivation significantly. Many theists may explain their moral motivation with at least partial reference to God, which suggests that their theism contributes in some way to their moral motivation even if it is not *essential* to it. In practice, however, we do not see a significant difference in the incentives that theists have to act morally in comparison to non-theists – likely because their central motivation originates in facts about their psychology and biology that are not tied to their evaluations of these abstract issues.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, rational deliberation primarily serves as a source of post-hoc justifications for otherwise automatic evaluative judgments (Haidt 2001).

are not vital to the development of proper moral motivation. The search for a strong objection to practical atheism must continue.

### **Meaning**

Despite the shortcomings of the previous objections to practical atheism, one might not yet be persuaded to take the view seriously. Such a person might hold that belief in God is necessary for one's life to have meaning. In the absence of any divine element in our lives, we may fall into existential despair and question whether there is any true meaning to our continued existences, particularly given their finite nature. Consider how William Lane Craig (2008) articulates this point:

If each individual person passes out of existence when he dies, then what ultimate meaning can be given to his life? Does it really matter whether he ever existed at all? It might be said that his life was important because it influenced others or affected the course of history. But this shows only a relative significance to his life, not ultimate significance. His life may be important relative to certain other events, but what is the ultimate significance of any of those events? If all the events are meaningless, then what can be the ultimate significance of influencing any of them? Ultimately, it makes no difference. (p. 72)

Craig's claim is bold, and he further asserts that all the efforts to make the world a better place (e.g., by alleviating pain and suffering, working toward world peace) are without any ultimate significance in the absence of an afterlife (Craig 2008, p. 73). If Craig is right in his portrayal of the godless universe, then it appears we should care a great deal about God's existence. We should want to know whether our lives are without any ultimate significance. Craig's claims are consistent with the worries of many theists, and many of them derive great personal satisfaction from their personal religious practices, involvement in a religious community, and the relationships with God they believe they develop. Nevertheless, his claims are too extreme: life is not meaningless without God.

First, the claim that life has no ultimate meaning if we die unnecessarily limits the spectrum of meaning to extraordinary lengths of time without offering a justification of why this should be the case. Thomas Nagel (1979) notes the absurdity of this focus on mortality as the key to determining meaning: “It is often remarked that nothing we do now will matter in a million years. But if that is true, then by the same token, nothing that will be the case in a million years matters now. *In particular, it does not matter now that in a million years nothing we do now will matter*” (p. 11, our emphasis). Furthermore, Nagel notes that chains of justification for doing things repeatedly terminate within our lives, even if a justification for the entire process is absent. Taking aspirin to alleviate a headache, for instance, is not a pointless activity even in the absence of some larger context or meaning: wanting to be free of the pain is enough to keep the act from being meaningless (Nagel 1979, p. 12). There are even some activities and experiences that are meaningful in part because of their *short* duration. Certain trips, experiences, and even periods in one’s life are more meaningful when they do not last for an overly long time. The treasured aspects of one’s undergraduate years are in large part treasured because this is a fleeting transitional period of one’s life; we would probably have a different outlook on them if we remained undergraduates for a decade or two.

More fundamentally, one who believes that there are no meaningful earthly pursuits in the absence of divinity appears to have a very impoverished value system. Consider many of the activities we often deem meaningful – writing books, raising children, educating the youth, donating to charities, competing in sports, falling in love, and so on. Do these activities really cease to have any noteworthy meaning if God does not exist? We believe they do not: they are examples of activities that are intrinsically good. Such activities are

meaningful and worth doing even if they have no beneficial consequences whatsoever.<sup>10</sup>

There may not be any way to construct a philosophical proof that, say, writing a book or falling in love is intrinsically valuable, but borrowing a strategy from Erik Wielenberg (2005, p. 35), we can subject these activities to G. E. Moore's isolation test. We can consider what value these activities would have "if they existed *by themselves*, in absolute isolation" and whether we would still find them worth doing (Moore 1903, p. 91). So far as we can tell, these activities pass Moore's isolation test: these activities are simply worth doing for their own sake. Our view here is not just based on our intuitions but also on the observation that the majority of skeptics about the existence of God do not cease to engage in these activities based on that information.

Craig seems to conflate two distinct concepts: the meaning *of* life and meaning *in* life. The meaning of life is a compelling mystery and notoriously difficult to pinpoint for theists and non-theists alike. Meaning in life is easier to identify (though it too is the subject of much debate): to be virtuous, raise healthy and happy children, travel the world, contribute to the sum total of human knowledge, or improve the lives of others, among many other possible goals. Craig therefore trades on the ambiguity of the meaning of life – what he variously calls "ultimate meaning" or "ultimate significance" – to conclude that meaning in life is impossible without an afterlife. This is mere equivocation.

Of course, a clever interlocutor might note that religiosity confers certain benefits with respect to meaningfulness. Religious participation is known to increase reports of well-being among adherents and reduce feelings of despair, perhaps as a result of the social support system it promotes (Vail et al. 2010; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman 2010). In

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<sup>10</sup> The idea that some activities are ends in themselves – that is, they do not serve to advance any further end – traces back to Aristotle (1962), and these activities are commonly employed in accounts of what makes life meaningful (e.g., Wielenberg 2005, pp. 31-37; Audi 2005, pp. 337-341).

particular, God appears to serve as an external locus of control – and a source of comfort and belonging – for some people who feel they lack control in their own lives (Gebauer & Maio 2012; Kay et al. 2010). These feelings of self-worth, control, and confidence in one’s place in the world are key factors in the reports of people who say that they live meaningful lives (Steger 2009).

However, psychological studies of the effects of religion on well-being have historically ignored religious disbelievers, either due to disinterest or limited sample sizes. This gap in the literature is slowly being filled, and one recent study found that among four measures of mental health – life satisfaction, gratitude, hope, and affect – atheists and theists significantly differed on only one: theists reported feeling more gratitude in their lives (Moore & Leach 2015). We must also remember that those of dominantly religious societies often ostracize or otherwise reject nonbelievers. Greater tolerance of nonbelief would presumably alleviate this problem, and Phil Zuckerman’s sociological study of Denmark and Sweden, substantially nonreligious societies, suggests as much. He remarks that these countries are “remarkably strong, safe, healthy, moral, and prosperous” and that “society without God is not only possible, but can be quite civil and pleasant” (Zuckerman 2010, p. 4). We should not assume that our lives must necessarily be less fulfilling in the absence of divine or religious elements.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> One might wonder, however, whether people’s actual behavior would correspond with the philosophical arguments we’ve presented. For example, there may be no good reasons to think that God is necessary for a meaningful life, but it may be the case that people who relinquish their belief in God feel as if their lives are suddenly meaningless. In one respect, this provides a clear reason for apathy toward EQs: caring about EQs can lead us into unnecessary and irrational despair!

A more substantive response draws on psychological data. A test case for this empirical reality might be those social psychological studies of the reactions of people who are directly confronted with clear disconfirmation of strongly-held beliefs (Balch, Farnsworth, & Wilkins 1983; Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter 1956). Some ignore or otherwise rationalize away the disconfirmation. Others shift the focus of their beliefs, such that the disconfirmation is no longer relevant. Still others accept the disconfirmation and walk away from their beliefs entirely. Importantly, for the third group, the act of changing one’s beliefs isn’t enough, by itself, to usefully predict how a person will psychologically react. Rather, people react to the events in their lives, such as

Ultimately, affirming or denying God's existence has little bearing on whether one can live a meaningful life. Like the preceding objections to practical atheism, this one should be rejected. But there are still more to consider.

### **What About the Historical Prominence of These Issues?**

At this juncture, someone well-versed in the history of philosophy might make the following observation: the positions we have thus far discussed have been historically significant as part of the philosophical canon. For instance, the thought that moral obligations might be grounded in God's commands has been explored by many moral theorists over the centuries, and so one might think that having an informed view of morality requires engaging with this position to some extent. Similar remarks can be made about moral motivation: the view that belief in God plays a significant role in moral motivation has been historically significant, so perhaps it should be engaged even if alternative views have been formulated. Finally, the position that God's existence is necessary for human lives to be meaningful has been historically prominent, and this position is still under discussion today (as some of our earlier citations indicate). Why is this not reason enough to investigate the matter?

We should first be clear about what this objector is advocating. It cannot be the case that everyone has an epistemic requirement to investigate every historically influential viewpoint on a given topic in order to have epistemically justified beliefs regarding that topic. Such a requirement would be far too demanding: it would be extraordinarily difficult to have

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a disconfirmed expectation or a surprising if disturbing insight, based on who they are (i.e., their self-identity, their personality traits) and what social influences are operating on them at the time (e.g., do they have a strong social support system?). Thus, we are left with probabilities rather than certainties, and so the question becomes: is it *likely* that people who relinquish their belief in God will feel as if their lives are meaningless (and to feel this as if it were of great practical significance rather than, say, a passing mood)? To this question, we can only return to our discussion of meaning and to the empirical reality that atheists do not report living lives that are less meaningful than theists.

epistemically justified beliefs about any reasonably complex issue, and those who lacked the time or resources to investigate the history of the topics in question would be doomed to *never* have justified beliefs about them. Thus, the objector's position is better understood as applying only to issues that are of particular practical importance. The vast majority of people care both about acting ethically and about whether their lives are meaningful, and their views about these topics can certainly affect their behavior. Hence, given the importance of these topics, it seems that the epistemic standards should be higher than usual. People should, the objector reasons, be required to investigate these topics at a level of depth that requires engagement with EQs.<sup>12</sup>

The intuitive pull of this objection is difficult to deny, but that allure is in part derived from our status as academic philosophers. It is less demanding for us to engage in serious academic inquiry and critical reflection because a large part of our lives revolves around it. That task is much more difficult for people with non-academic professions, especially those who lack the formal philosophical training that would be required to investigate these matters in significant depth. Moreover, all of us are confronted by many issues of equivalent (or, in some contexts, perhaps greater) practical significance than those pertaining to God's possible connection to moral obligation, moral motivation, or meaningful existence. Climate change, for instance, is certain to affect millions of people over many generations, but we hardly expect everyone to investigate all the influential studies concerning its potential effects or read all the discussions of how best to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions and what we ought to do as individuals to help solve the problem. To consider another example, implicit bias is a pervasive feature of human interaction and one of the central contributors to racial injustice even in societies where racial equality under the law has purportedly been achieved,

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<sup>12</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this concern to our attention.

but we do not demand that everyone become familiar with all the significant aspects of the phenomenon in an effort to combat contemporary prejudice. In both these cases, it is acceptable for people to acquire snapshots of the issues and determine what they ought to do based on that information. Such matters of practical significance are not limited to large-scale social problems either: sometimes these matters concern things of great personal importance that are relatively insignificant in the societal scheme of things, such as being adequately prepared for a presentation to the board of directors at one's company or choosing what home to purchase in one's city of residence.

With respect to ordinary people, we believe that investigating divine command theory, God's possible role in moral motivation, and God's connection to life's meaning are best understood as epistemically supererogatory actions – actions that are epistemically good to perform but not epistemically required. More specifically, an action is epistemically supererogatory “iff (1) performing the act fulfills no epistemic duty, (2) performing the act is epistemically praiseworthy, and (3) omitting the act is not epistemically blameworthy” (Hedberg 2014, pp. 3625-3626). While it is surely epistemically beneficial to study historically prominent positions in philosophy, it cannot be a strict requirement for ordinary people, and with respect to the vast majority of practically significant topics that we encounter in our lives, we are not blameworthy for failing to engage in such a thorough level of inquiry.

Of course, it might be the case that the epistemic standards for philosophers are different: after all, many of them teach about the history of philosophy or are at least expected to have some familiarity with historically prominent positions in various areas. Thus, the professional norms in philosophy might entail that academic philosophers *are*

blameworthy if they lack knowledge about these topics.<sup>13</sup> But if that's the case, this only highlights how philosophers are different from the general population and thereby may have reasons to care about EQs that ordinary people lack. In the second section, we acknowledged some individuals for whom apatheism is not an appropriate attitude to have regarding EQs, and it may be that a large portion of philosophers fall into this category. In any event, for the vast majority of people, the historical prominence of views that tie God to moral obligation, moral motivation, and the meaning of life does not entail that they are required to investigate EQs.

### **Miracles**

A further reason for thinking EQs are practically significant could be derived from God's potential interaction with us through miracles. Miracles are typically understood as divine violations of the laws of nature. If anomalies in nature do occur (e.g., the healing of terminal illnesses, fulfillment of petitionary prayer), the question of God's existence seems important, particularly to those who, faced with the often-daunting nature of human life, feel compelled to ask God to aid them with their worldly troubles. Answers to EQs are not just intellectual affirmations; they often function as articles of faith or expressions of religious belief. If answers to EQs matter to God, then with the right beliefs – that is, with the correct answers to EQs – our likelihood of being privileged by God to witness or directly experience a miracle might increase.

But while reports of miracles are somewhat common, the actual evidence for their occurrence is meager. Because of their extraordinary nature, rationally accepting that a miracle has occurred requires tremendously compelling evidence, and it is rarely (if ever)

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<sup>13</sup> In a similar manner, we might expect psychologists to have some familiarity with the history of psychology or evolutionary biologists to be especially knowledgeable about Charles Darwin.

present. David Hume (1993) famously stated, “[N]o testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish” (p. 77). Thus, on Hume’s account, with the possible exception of a miracle observed by a very large number of people and substantiated by an inability to explain the event scientifically, it will always be more likely that reporters of a miracle have hallucinated or are otherwise mistaken about their report, which entails a skeptical attitude about whether God has ever performed any miracles.

Some sympathetic to practical atheism might be inclined to accept Hume’s skeptical attitude toward miracles, but there are significant worries that Hume’s criteria for evidence of a miracle may be too stringent (Swinburne 1968). Admittedly, the evidence for miracles typically consists of isolated personal experiences – a rather unreliable source considering that the chances of being mistaken about one’s observations are substantially higher than the laws of nature being broken. This observation might justify a general attitude of caution or doubt when one hears a report of a miracle, but it does not imply that there could never be evidence for miracles or that God is incapable of performing them. However, the defender of atheism can offer a better response to this objection than endorsing a Humean skepticism about miracles.

Even if miracles occur, it is uncontroversial that they are extraordinarily rare events. We may speak of incredible occurrences in sports like the “Music City Miracle” or the “Miracle on Ice,” but these were not miracles. They were just improbable occurrences: there is no evidence that God altered the laws of nature to aid the Tennessee Titans or the 1980 U.S. national hockey team during these events. Genuine divine intervention in the world, if it occurs, must be an extremely rare phenomenon, and many people never report being the beneficiaries of a miracle at any point during their lives. Moreover, individuals who do report

experiencing miracles come from all religions, and some report miracles despite being non-religious (though this event often prompts them to convert to a religion). Thus, no one can ever reasonably expect to experience a miracle, and there is no evidence that one is more likely to experience a miracle based on her particular answers to EQs. These observations appear to naturally manifest in individuals' attitudes toward miracles, since ordinary people do not rely on them for day-to-day success. They do not, for example, expect that God will intervene to pay off their credit card debt, cure them of the flu, or help their children get to soccer practice on time. This suggests that a fairly apathetic outlook on miracles is already widely held, and given the lack of evidence for miracles and the infrequency of their occurrence (if they do occur at all), this attitude is justified.

But perhaps an objector would suggest that the practical significance of a miracle is not found in its relative frequency but in its content or meaning. That is, even if a miracle is extremely rare (so rare that a person could never reasonably expect to witness or benefit from it), it may nevertheless be practically significant because of what it signals. For example, many Christians believe that Jesus was literally raised from the dead, and this belief in Jesus's resurrection is a cornerstone of their faith and of a hope that motivates many of the projects of their lives. Does the possibility of this miracle, however remote, immediately suggest that we should be concerned about the existence of God? Not immediately. First, we should attend to whether we have any good reasons to believe the miraculous report itself before worrying ourselves about the source of the event. If we did have good reasons to believe the miraculous report, this would still not suggest an immediate interest in God's existence because the source of the potentially miraculous event is effectively inaccessible to us. There are an indefinite number of reasons why such an event could have occurred: God may have willed it; infinite universes may exist wherein all possible events occur, and our universe is

one in which Jesus is raised from the dead; galactic hitchhikers may have turned on the Infinite Improbability Drive at that very moment; or perhaps the purported miracle has a scientific explanation that we were just unable to understand or recognize at the time. We would need some further reason to favor the divine explanation over the other possibilities. The occurrence of a seemingly miraculous event is not automatically evidence for God's existence or a reason to investigate EQs.

### **The Afterlife**

A final reason to think belief in God's existence is practically significant is that belief or disbelief in God could affect one's afterlife. Echoing Pascal (2008), one might argue that the stakes regarding one's belief in God are extremely high: one could suffer eternal torment for holding the wrong belief and enjoy eternal bliss for holding the right belief. Thus, belief in God is a matter of great practical concern – whether we believe in God may have more impact on our long-term welfare than anything else. Of course, not everyone agrees with Pascal's argument that we should believe in God on the basis of a self-interested wager,<sup>14</sup> but many do accept the idea that God's existence has practical significance because of its potential impact on one's afterlife. To appraise this objection, we must first consider the various claims on which it rests. What claims would one have to affirm and defend for this objection to be plausible?

First, one must hold that the existence of an afterlife that we can experience is metaphysically possible. If we cannot survive death, then obviously nothing we do while

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<sup>14</sup> One may worry, for instance, that Pascal's wager ignores the fact that there are many possible deities and that we are, therefore, very likely to believe in the wrong God even if we reject atheism. Others may doubt that a benevolent God would reward those who believe only on self-interested reasons (rather than for moral or spiritual reasons) while punishing truth-seeking skeptics. Michael Martin (1983) has even reformulated Pascal's wager as an argument for atheism.

alive (including believing or disbelieving in God) can affect how we fare in the afterlife. Since there is no evidence that people continue existing in the physical world after death (and an abundance of evidence to the contrary), *prima facie* it appears that death is indeed the end of existence unless there is a supernatural realm. The real concern with this claim, however, is a matter of personal identity. There must be some form of identity retention in the afterlife: the person who exists in the afterlife must actually *be* the person who died rather than a mere representation or replica of the person. Otherwise, the person who receives rewards or punishments in the afterlife is not the same person who earned them.<sup>15</sup>

Second, one must hold that belief in God plays a significant role in determining people's fates in the afterlife. It need not be the sole determining factor in how our afterlife goes, but it must not be a negligible one. If belief in God does not significantly impact our fates in the afterlife, then how we answer EQs has no bearing on how we will fare after death.

Third, one must hold that the effects of belief in God on one's fate in the afterlife is not arbitrary. If this condition is not met, then our fates in the afterlife would be unjustified and (to some extent) beyond our control. God could, for example, reward some believers with eternal salvation, punish other believers with eternal damnation, and simply not grant nonbelievers any afterlife at all. Of course, like the idea of rewarding or punishing people in the afterlife who are not the same people that lived in the physical world, this practice would raise serious concerns about God's moral goodness and trustworthiness. Notably, this condition does not require that two people with the same beliefs be affected in precisely the same way. God could require members of different cultures to hold differing theological beliefs and then reward or punish them based on their fidelity to their respective beliefs.

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<sup>15</sup> Of course, if our beliefs in God affect how others fare in the afterlife, then we might have moral obligations to alter our beliefs (if we can) on that person's behalf, but since a deity who allocated rewards and punishments in this way would not seem ethical, it is unclear why we would trust this deity to treat those inhabiting the afterlife in ways consistent with our behavior.

Whether or not all people must hold the same beliefs to reap the rewards in the afterlife, it follows that the objector must endorse a fourth claim: we must have some way of determining what beliefs we are supposed to hold to reap these post-mortem rewards. If we cannot rationally determine what set of beliefs is correct, then whether our beliefs about God generate rewards or punishments in the afterlife will be almost entirely a matter of luck. Moreover, consulting a particular holy text is not a viable means of acquiring this information: the multitude of different religious beliefs and the divergence of comparably intelligent and informed people regarding which set of beliefs is true make it difficult to ascertain which beliefs we should hold.

The objector must also endorse the claim that there is at least one afterlife that is nontrivially more desirable than the others. Suppose there are only two afterlives that one can experience: heaven or hell. If a person is indifferent about whether she goes to heaven or hell, then the prospect of the afterlife gives her no reason to care about whether God exists. The notion that heaven is more preferable than hell may seem so obvious that it would be absurd to question it, but Brian Ribeiro (2011) has recently argued otherwise, drawing significantly on related work by Bernard Williams (1973). Suppose we amassed a list of activities that we enjoy pursuing. For any activity on this list, it seems like anyone would eventually grow tired of the activity if the person could pursue it in perpetuity. Suppose one enjoys playing tennis. If one existed eternally, then one could play tennis indefinitely, but given our psychological constitutions, it is hard to imagine that the person would not eventually tire of playing tennis. This pattern seems replicable for any activity, meaning that we could exhaust our enjoyment of all activities and still have eternity to endure. We could have radically different psychological constitutions in the afterlife than we have in our current existences, but in that case, we encounter the aforementioned problems regarding personal identity: such a drastic

change to our personalities, preferences, and basic cognitive processes would seem to make us different people altogether. If the afterlife would be enjoyed only by non-persons or people different from those who existed on Earth, then the afterlife ceases to be desirable *for us*. Not everyone has such a bleak outlook on immortal existences (e.g., Fischer 2009), but the desirability of an eternal afterlife certainly cannot be taken for granted.<sup>16</sup>

If any of these five claims fails to hold, then appealing to the afterlife to defend the importance of EQs is a poor strategy.<sup>17</sup> At this juncture, one might be tempted to conclude that the argument fails: given the difficulty in establishing even one substantive philosophical claim, an argument that relies on five of them must make a misstep somewhere. But most elaborate philosophical arguments involve multiple controversial premises, so such a response is too facile, unless one is satisfied with embracing a fairly strong skepticism about all philosophical arguments. Even so, there is little doubt that crafting a plausible account of the afterlife would be a massive philosophical undertaking, especially since attempting to support some of these claims can generate new problems. For example, while the survival of an immaterial soul (understood as the source of one's identity) can solve the identity-

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<sup>16</sup> This condition assumes that an afterlife would be eternal or at least extremely long (relative to an ordinary human life), an assumption held by many theists. Some may reject this assumption, but doing so would also entail that the consequences of having the wrong belief about the afterlife would be much less severe than they would be if the afterlife was unending. Thus, as the afterlife shortens in length, this objection to apatheism gets proportionally weaker.

<sup>17</sup> A reviewer suggests that the mere knowledge that the truth of theism increases the probability of a personal afterlife might be sufficient to motivate an interest in EQs. If that is the case, then only the first of these five claims (which secures the notion that the afterlife will be one that we can personally experience) would be necessary to generate an objection to practical apatheism.

We do not think this picture is accurate, however. Even if a personal afterlife is more probable given the truth of theism, we do not think this will have practical significance if the other conditions are not met. One could reason that an afterlife is more likely on the truth of theism, but if she also cannot see, for instance, a reliable way to control what kind of afterlife she experiences – for example, because she thinks that God's judgments about how people are treated in the afterlife is not based on having the correct beliefs about God; or because she believes God's judgments about who receives good and bad afterlives is arbitrary; or because she cannot reliably determine what beliefs she is supposed to have – then she does not have a reason to spend time investigating EQs. Her fate would be out of her hands, and so from a practical standpoint, there is no reason for her answers to EQs to affect the way she lives. Similarly, if she thinks all possible afterlives would be equally desirable (or undesirable), the potential increase in the probability of an afterlife would not give her a practical reason to investigate EQs because the quality of her afterlife would not be affected by how she answers EQs. Again, she lacks a reason to change how she lives.

retention problem, such an approach gives rise to various new concerns.<sup>18</sup> How can an immaterial entity causally interact with a physical entity? How would we explain how chemical fluctuations in the brain can cause mental illness or radically alter one's personality if identity is tied to one's *soul*?

Despite these concerns, it may be possible to develop a reasonable account of an afterlife that affirms all five of these claims and thereby grounds a strong objection to practical atheism. While we doubt that there currently exists any account that has accomplished this feat, it would be premature to conclude that it cannot be done (especially without evaluating the myriad of recent philosophical accounts of the afterlife). Thus, our appraisal of this objection is more modest: it does not provide a decisive reason to reject practical atheism, but it cannot be dismissed as easily as its five predecessors. Whether an account of the afterlife can establish that EQs are practically significant remains an open question.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have examined practical atheism – an attitude of apathy or indifference to EQs rooted in the belief that their answers lack practical significance – and six objections to this outlook on EQs. Five of the six objections that we examined are unsuccessful, and even the most promising objection – an appeal to the significance of EQs with respect to the afterlife – encounters significant obstacles. Since the best objection to practical atheism is deeply controversial, it follows that whether practical atheism is an appropriate attitude toward EQs should also be deeply controversial and that it deserves further philosophical examination.

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<sup>18</sup> For a concise overview of these problems, see Perry (1978).

Practical atheism might ultimately prove untenable, but it has not yet been examined enough for such a conclusion to be warranted, especially since there may be positive arguments for atheism. We have devoted this entire paper to appraising some objections to atheism and have said nothing about the supporting arguments that could be offered in its favor. Admittedly, such arguments are a rare sight in the literature, but they do exist. Robert McKim (2001), for example, draws on God's hiddenness to provide a clever argument that God (if such a being exists) must not regard it as particularly important whether we form the correct theistic beliefs. McKim reasons that if there were significant consequences for us that depended on us having the right beliefs about God, then God would not stay hidden from us; instead, God would make our circumstances more conducive to forming the correct theistic beliefs.<sup>19</sup> We take no stand here on whether McKim's argument succeeds or fails, but we think it is a clear example of a type of argument that could bolster the case for practical atheism. For now, however, a supporting case for practical atheism must wait for another occasion.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> We do not mean to imply that McKim would endorse practical atheism as we have defined it. In fact, some of his remarks about the importance of religious beliefs for the individuals that hold them appear to be in tension with some of the beliefs a practical atheist would hold (McKim 2001, pp. 137-138). Our point is only that this particular argument – held in conjunction with certain other views – could clearly yield support for practical atheism.

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