

Skeptical Theism, Pro-theism, and Anti-theism

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Skeptical Theism, Pro-theism, and Anti-theism

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1. Introduction

In the literature on the axiology of theism, there are primarily two positions taken: pro-theism and anti-theism.¹ Pro-theists hold that the world would, in some sense, be better if God exists; anti-theists hold that the world would, in some sense, be worse if God exists. Each of these positions can be subdivided: there are personal pro-theists, who hold that God's existence would make the world better for at least some persons; personal anti-theists, who hold that God's nonexistence would make the world better for at least some persons; impersonal pro-theists, who hold that God's existence would make the world better *simpliciter*; and impersonal anti-theists, who hold that God's existence would make the world worse *simpliciter*. And these positions can be further subdivided: "wide" or "narrow" can be applied to each of the above positions to indicate how strong "better" or "worse" is taken to be: the "wide" qualification specifies that the world is better (or worse) *overall*, or that some person's life is better (or worse) *overall*, if God does (or doesn't) exist; the "narrow" qualification specifies that the world is better (or worse) *in some respect*, or that some person's life is better (or worse) *in some respect*, if God does (or doesn't) exist. For example, a wide personal pro-theist holds that there are at least some persons whose lives would be better overall if God exists. Conversely, a narrow personal pro-theist holds that there are at least some persons whose lives would be better *in some respect* if God exists. Clearly, many of these positions are compatible: one can, for example, be both a personal pro-theist and a personal anti-theist.

I will not discuss any of the "narrow" positions. This is because the narrow positions can all be easily established. For example, suppose that Sally is an atheist: she believes that

God doesn't exist. Further, suppose that theism turns out to be true. In such a world, God's existence has made Sally's life worse in a certain respect: she has a false belief (namely, her belief that atheism is true). This suffices to establish both narrow personal anti-theism and narrow impersonal anti-theism. But this isn't a very interesting result, and I know of no variant in which it becomes interesting.² And similar things can be said about all other pro-theist and anti-theist narrow positions. Therefore, I will not consider any of the "narrow" positions in the remainder of this chapter. All references to positions will refer to their "wide" versions.³

In this chapter, I'm going to consider personal and impersonal anti-theism and personal and impersonal pro-theism. I'll show that a position known as *skeptical theism* undermines arguments for personal anti-theism and impersonal anti-theism. On the other hand, I'll show that (at least some) arguments for personal and impersonal pro-theism are not susceptible to criticisms stemming from skeptical theism. This throws a wrench in many debates surrounding the axiology of theism: if skeptical theism is true, then it is very difficult to establish certain positions in answer to the axiological question about God.

2. Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil

Arguments from evil purport to show that some facts about evil that we know of either entail that God doesn't exist or at least make it improbable that he exists. Logical arguments from evil (e.g., Mackie 1955) attempt to do the former: they try to show that the existence of evil and the existence of God are incompatible, and since evil exists, it follows that God doesn't exist. Alternatively, evidential arguments from evil (e.g., Rowe 1979) try to show the latter: they argue that some facts about evil render God's existence improbable. Logical arguments from evil have been largely abandoned; many philosophers—both theists and atheists—think that God's existence is compatible with evil.⁴ Therefore, much of the contemporary focus has been on evidential versions of the argument from evil, and in particular William Rowe's (1979) version. His argument (and others like it) makes use of something like the following inference:

- (1) We know of no good⁵ that justifies God in allowing some instance of evil.⁶
- (2) Therefore, probably, there is no such good.

From (2), it is inferred that God probably doesn't exist, since God would not allow an instance of evil if there is no good that justifies him in doing so.⁷ Many challenges have been given to premise (1): many philosophers offer *theodicies*; they argue that we know why God allows (at least some) evil (e.g., Plantinga 2004; Collins 2013, and Adams 1999). Alternatively, skeptical

theists argue that the inference from (1) to (2) is dubious: that we don't know of a good that justifies God in allowing evil doesn't entail that there is probably no such good. And hence we cannot infer (2) from (1), and arguments from evil that rely on an inference like this are undercut: if the argument makes an inference from the goods (or evils) that we know of to the goods (or evils) that there are, its conclusion will be unmotivated.

There are various forms of skeptical theism,⁸ but for the purposes of this chapter, I'll understand a skeptical theist to be a monotheist who affirms the following thesis:

SKEPTICISM: We have no good reason for thinking that the goods and evils that we know are connected to some instance of evil are representative, in respect to their total value, of the actual goods and evils that are connected to said instance of evil.⁹

Goods and evils are taken to be states of affairs, and different states of affairs have different values. Take some disvaluable (bad) state of affairs X. If there's a sufficiently valuable (good) state of affairs Y that requires X, then Y (at least possibly) justifies one in allowing X. As such, SKEPTICISM amounts to the claim that we have no good reason for thinking that the states of affairs that we know are (causally) connected to some instance of evil are representative, in respect to their total value, of the actual states of affairs connected to the prior mentioned instance of evil. SKEPTICISM, it is held, undermines the inference from (1) to (2).¹⁰ While atheists cannot be skeptical theists, skeptical theists think that *everyone*—theist or atheist—ought to endorse SKEPTICISM, and hence *everyone* ought to reject arguments from evil that rely on an inference similar to the one made from (1) to (2). But *why* should anyone accept SKEPTICISM? For accepting SKEPTICISM (or something like it), we are sometimes reminded of the fact that humans are cognitively limited creatures (Bergmann 2001; Alston 1991). Other times we're given analogies about parents and children, and reminded that (cognitively) we are like small children and God is like our parent (Wykstra 1984).

A more concrete reason to endorse SKEPTICISM is the following. Say that an *inscrutable* state of affairs is a state of affairs we know nothing significant about: all we know about an inscrutable state of affairs is that it's connected to some event, and other trivial facts (e.g., that it will happen in time, etc.). For any instance of evil we know of, we have no good reason to think that there aren't inscrutable states of affairs (causally) connected to it. (I will defend this below.) And if we have no good reason for thinking that there aren't inscrutable states of affairs connected to an event, then we have no good reason for thinking that the total

value of states of affairs connected to the event that we know of are representative in respect to the total value of events actually connected to the event. This is because if the value of a state of affairs is inscrutable, then we have no good reason for thinking that it falls within the range of the values of the states of affairs that are connected to the event that we know of. And hence we have no good reason for thinking that all the states of affairs connected to the event fall within the same range. Indeed, if we did have such a reason, then we'd have good reason to think that there aren't any inscrutable states of affairs connected to the event. But we don't. And hence SKEPTICISM is secured.

The only contentious claim above is that we have no good reason for thinking that there are not inscrutable states of affairs connected to some event. Why should we think that's true? We should think that's true because many connections are separated by long periods of time, making it more difficult to perceive the connection. And, moreover, many connections have not yet occurred (such as the connections between current events and future states of affairs). Furthermore, some connections are complex and therefore difficult for humans to perceive. For example, many years ago, it wasn't obvious to anyone that smoking was connected to getting cancer: the connection between smoking and getting cancer was complex, and took some time to discern. Because of the complexity of connections and the fact that we cannot perceive future connections, we have no good reason to think that there aren't any inscrutable states of affairs connected to some event. (Indeed, since we know that for any event we observe, there will very likely be distant states of affairs connected to it, we have good reason to think that there are inscrutable states of affairs connected to it). Conjoin this with the reasoning in the above paragraph, and we (both theist and atheist) have good reason to endorse SKEPTICISM. There's no doubt more to say here, but I don't have the space to say it.¹ Instead, I will be assuming the truth of SKEPTICISM for the remainder of this chapter. Anyone not convinced by the above argument can read this as a conditional: if skeptical theism is true, then certain arguments for personal and impersonal anti-theism are undermined.

3. Skeptical Theism and Anti-theism

3.1. Skeptical Theism and Personal Anti-theism

Personal anti-theism is the view that there are at least some persons of whom it would be better overall if God didn't exist. One argument for this view is called "the meaningful life argument."

¹ See Hendricks (2020) for a more developed version of this argument.

The meaningful life argument purports to show that if God exists, then at least some persons will lack a meaningful life, and if one's life lacks meaning if God exists, it's better for her that God doesn't exist.¹¹ Kirk Lougheed has developed an objective version of the meaningful life argument: he says that there is a set of objective goods "*O*s" which is "such that for every agent *S* pursuing or obtaining the goods in *O*s is *necessary for S to have a meaningful life*" (2017, 344). From here, he states the argument as follows:

3. If God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining some of the goods in *O*s, then God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining a meaningful life.
4. If God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining a meaningful life, then it's rational for *S* to prefer that God doesn't exist.¹²
5. So, if God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining some of the goods in *O*s, then it's rational for *S* to prefer that God doesn't exist.
6. God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining some of the goods in *O*s.
7. Thus, it's rational for *S* to prefer that God doesn't exist. (Lougheed 2017, 344)¹³

But this argument needs to be revised. Here's why. First, let's grant that God's existence constrains or prevents *S* from obtaining a meaningful life. Next, suppose that there is some great good *for S* that would only obtain if God exists *and* that this good is so great that it would make *S*'s life better for her than if she had a meaningful life. If this is the case, then *S*'s life would be *worse* for her if she had a meaningful life. So, the question then is whether God's existence precluding (at least some of) the goods residing in *O*s brings about a greater good for *S*. This means that premises (4), (5), and (6) need to be amended as follows:

- 4*. If God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining a meaningful life, then it's rational for *S* to prefer that God doesn't exist *provided that a greater good doesn't come about from S lacking a meaningful life*.
- 5*. So, if God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining some of the goods in *O*s, then it's rational for *S* to prefer that God doesn't exist *provided that a greater good doesn't come about from S lacking a meaningful life*.

6*. God's existence would constrain or prevent S from obtaining some of the goods in *Os* and a greater good doesn't come about from S lacking a meaningful life.

The key premise of the objective meaningful life argument is now (6*). While Lougheed has defended his original version of the argument, he (unsurprisingly) hasn't defended this revised version. Thus, we cannot look to his work for a defense of (6*). So, how might one go about defending (6*)? One way would be as follows:

8. We know of no (greater) good that comes about from S lacking a meaningful life.
9. Therefore, probably, there is no such good.

From (8) and (9), we have reason to think that premise (6*) is probably true. It should be clear, however, that in the same way that the inference from (1) to (2) (see above) falls prey to SKEPTICISM, the inference from (8) to (9) also falls prey to SKEPTICISM: both are inductive inferences from the goods we know about to the goods that there are, and SKEPTICISM (we have assumed) undermines this type of inference. Therefore, this route will be of little use: skeptical theism precludes this route for advocates of the (revised) objective meaningful life argument. And hence skeptical theism leaves premise (6*), and therefore the conclusion of the argument, unmotivated.

An alternative route would be to mimic the so-called common sense problem of evil. The commonsense problem of evil (Dougherty 2008 and 2014) makes use of phenomenal conservative justification. The advocate of phenomenal conservatism holds that if it seems to S that p, then, in the absence of defeaters, S has (at least some) justification for believing p (Huemer 2007).¹⁴ The idea behind the commonsense problem of evil is that there are some evils that *seem* gratuitous,¹⁵ and this seeming provides justification for believing that it is, in fact, gratuitous. In a similar manner, one might try to exploit phenomenal conservatism to justify personal anti-theism: she might claim that it *seems* to her that there is no greater good that comes about from her lacking a meaningful life, and that this justifies her in accepting personal anti-theism. While it's possible to quibble over whether S has a defeater for her seeming here, I'll grant that she doesn't, and see where it takes us. The fact is that it doesn't take us very far at all: that premise (6*) is justified for S doesn't mean it's justified for anyone else. And the revised objective meaningful life argument—like its predecessor—is meant to convince others that personal anti-theism is true: it's not merely supposed to show that it's

possible that someone is justified in accepting its conclusion. In other words, the proponent of the objective meaningful life argument is concerned with showing that personal anti-theism is true, not merely showing that there can be phenomenal conservative justification for it.¹⁶ And hence this route does not offer us much promise either.¹⁷

A final route to establish premise (6*) would be to show that a meaningful life is *unsurpassably* good for S. If a meaningful life is unsurpassably good for S, then, if God's existence precludes a good that's necessary for S to have a meaningful life, whatever good his existence brings about for S, it will not outweigh S's lacking a meaningful life. And hence personal anti-theism is true. A problem for this route is that a meaningful life doesn't seem to be a candidate for being an unsurpassable good for S: there are clear cases in which the world is better for S if she lacks a meaningful life instead of having a meaningful life. And this means that we cannot rule out the possibility of a greater good for S coming about from her lacking a meaningful life. A clear case of this can be seen by (slightly) embellishing the story of Herman Goering. Goering was a Nazi leader, who was very successful at his job prior to losing the Second World War. However, Eleonore Stump points out:

None of us . . . would willingly trade lives with a moral monster such as . . . Goering, even if Goering had in fact been jovial or content, even if Goering had died before the Nazis lost the war. Just because Goering was a moral monster, we would not want to have had a life such as his. *So, even if Goering felt no remorse over the moral evil he did, his life suffered because of it.* (2010, 4, emphasis mine)

Stump's point is that because of who Goering became—because of the character he developed—his life was *worse for him* because he was successful. To see how this undermines the objective meaningful life argument, suppose that the meaning in Goering's life consisted of him doing his job well. A world in which Goering doesn't (or can't) do his job well is better *for him* than a world in which he does: it would be better overall for him to not be able to act in morally monstrous ways than to have a meaningful life consisting in performing immoral actions well. And hence it would have been better for Goering's life to lack meaning than for it to have meaning. This is why we wouldn't (or shouldn't) trade lives with Goering.

Perhaps, however, one holds that a meaningful life cannot be like Goering's: a meaningful life cannot involve performing heinous acts, such as those that were a part of Goering's life. Those who hold this view may consider a different example: suppose that S's

life is meaningful, and that if God exists, her life will lack meaning. Suppose, however, that if God exists, S will spend eternity with him in heaven. In such a case, S's life would lack meaning if God exists, but she'd also gain an eternal and pleasant afterlife. In such a case, S's life would be better if God exists; she should prefer that God exists even though it would mean that her life lacks meaning. And this shows that a meaningful life is not an unsurpassable good: an eternal and good afterlife is more valuable than a meaningful life. Thus, the proponent of the revised meaningful life argument cannot use this route to motivate premise (6*).

In this section, we've seen that the most obvious ways to go about motivating premise (6*) are dubious. Whether there's another way to motivate (6*), I do not know. However, as things stand, we have no good reason to endorse (6*), and hence the meaningful life argument fails. This same problem will plague other attempts to establish personal anti-theism: such arguments must show that God's existence will prevent some valuable anti-theistic good from obtaining in S's life, and that there is no other good that comes about from God's existence that makes up for the prevention of the anti-theistic good.¹⁸ However, as we saw above, skeptical theism makes this a difficult thing to show.

3.2. Skeptical Theism and Impersonal Anti-theism

Above, we saw that it's very difficult to establish personal anti-theism. The problem is that it's extremely difficult to show that there is no greater good that comes about from humans lacking certain anti-theistic goods, such as a meaningful life. This issue, however, also spells problems for *impersonal* anti-theism; the same problems that arise for personal anti-theism arise for impersonal anti-theism. This is because in order to motivate impersonal anti-theism, one would need to show that there are anti-theistic goods that are so valuable that the world is worse if God exists. But this will force the anti-theist to rely on something like the following line of reasoning:

10. If God exists, then we lack good X.
 11. We know of no (greater) good that comes about from our world lacking X (or comes about from God's existence).
- Therefore,
12. Probably, there is no such good.

However, it's clear that the inference from (11) to (12) is vulnerable to SKEPTICISM; skeptical theism undermines the inference from (11) to (12). And hence the impersonal anti-theist must find a different route to motivate (12).

The most obvious alternatives for the impersonal anti-theist to motivate (12) are to mimic the commonsense problem of evil (detailed in Section 3.1) or by identifying an unsurpassable anti-theistic good. If the impersonal anti-theist mimics the commonsense problem of evil, she is vulnerable to the same criticism raised against the personal anti-theist: she's trying to show that impersonal anti-theism is true, not merely that some persons possibly have phenomenal conservative justification for believing it. And hence this route will be of little use to her.

Perhaps, however, the impersonal anti-theist would have more luck identifying some unsurpassable anti-theistic good.¹⁹ What might this good be? The usual anti-theistic goods discussed are the good of privacy and the good of autonomy.²⁰ However, neither privacy nor autonomy is a candidate for being an unsurpassable good. Consider first privacy:

BULLY: Sarah is an anxious teenager. She has been becoming more and more distant at home, and her parents have taken notice. They are worried about her and try to talk to her about her sudden change in behavior. But Sarah won't open up. Her parents eventually become so worried that they go into her room when she's away and read her diary. They find out that she's been being bullied at school, and that this is causing her abnormal behavior. Her parents then go to the school principal and let him know about the bullying. The principal puts a stop to the bullying, and Sarah's life is now much improved.

BULLY is a pretty clear case in which a violation of privacy brings about a greater good: Sarah no longer being bullied while losing her privacy is better than her being bullied while continuing to have privacy. And this means that privacy is not a candidate for an unsurpassable good. In fact, it's easily surpassed.

So much for privacy. What about autonomy? Consider the following example:

WOODS: Sally, a teenager, is hiking with her parents in the mountains. A storm unexpectedly hits them, and she becomes separated and lost. Her parents are unable to find her. For weeks, they bring in search teams to look for her, but she is not found. However, Sally is not dead: she's simply unlucky that she never

crossed paths with the search teams. She lives on the mountain for a year on her own. During this year, she is completely autonomous: she chooses what she wants to do and when she wants to do it; there are no rules or authorities telling her what to do. Months later, she slips and hits her head on a rock, knocking her unconscious. Fortunately for her, a hiker stumbles upon her body, and brings her to a hospital. Once she's released from the hospital, she's reunited with her parents. However, once she returns home with her parents, she can no longer do whatever she wants whenever she wants: she must listen to her parents and follow their rules. However, Sally's life, though lacking autonomy, is now much improved.

WOODS straightforwardly shows that autonomy is not a candidate for an unsurpassable good: it is easily surpassed by other goods, such as being reunited with family. If there's any serious candidate for an unsurpassable anti-theistic good, I don't know of it. I leave it to the impersonal anti-theist to produce one. I conclude, therefore, that the prospects of motivating (12) by identifying an unsurpassable anti-theistic good are dubious.

In this section, I've argued that skeptical theism presents an obstacle to impersonal anti-theism: it makes it difficult to show that the world is better overall if God doesn't exist.

4. Pro-theism

4.1. How to be a Skeptical Theist *and* a Personal Pro-theist

Earlier, I argued that the objective meaningful life argument for personal anti-theism is undermined by skeptical theism. I further noted (fn 13) that one can make a similar objective meaningful life argument for personal pro-theism: one might think that S's life would lack meaning if God doesn't exist, and that it's therefore better for S if God exists. However, this argument, too, falls prey to skeptical theism: a meaningful life is not an unsurpassable good (see Section 3.1), and it is difficult to show that there is no anti-theistic good that outweighs having a meaningful life: an appeal to phenomenal conservatism won't do the trick (for reasons given above), and neither will an inference from our lack of knowledge of an anti-theistic good that is more valuable than a meaningful life to the conclusion that there is no such good; skeptical theism precludes such inferences. And hence this route for establishing personal pro-theism isn't viable.

However, there's an alternative way to establish personal pro-theism that *isn't* vulnerable to skeptical theism. The way to do so is to identify a good for some persons that is unsurpassable for them. While I argued above that none of the purported anti-theistic goods are candidates for being unsurpassable goods for some persons (or for the world), the same isn't true for at least one pro-theistic good, namely, the good of being in union with God; if God exists, some persons will have union with him. To be in union with God is to have one's will aligned with God's will and to have communion with him. Understood this way, union with God is an unsurpassable good: to be in union with God is to be in union with one's creator, who is all powerful, all knowing, and all good. Nothing can be better for a person than to have this union. This view goes (at least) back to St. Thomas Aquinas, and is defended by Stump (2010). Describing and defending Aquinas's views, she says, "The unending shared union of loving personal relationship with God is the best thing for human beings; the worst thing is its unending absence" (2010, 388). This view is plausible and *at the very least* isn't obviously false: union with God is a genuine candidate for the greatest good for human beings, and unlike the good of privacy and the good of autonomy, there aren't obvious counterexamples to it. This shouldn't be understood as my inferring from there being no goods that we know of that are greater for a person than union with God to the conclusion that there is no such good. Rather, I'm saying that this appears to be an unsurpassable good for persons, and there aren't any goods for persons that can be plausibly thought to be more valuable than it. Thus, the personal pro-theist can plausibly claim that there are some persons that the world would be better for if God exists, since this would entail that they obtain an unsurpassable good (i.e., union with God). So, if there are any problems with this argument for personal pro-theism, it isn't that skeptical theism undermines it: we don't need to rely on an inductive inference to make this case for personal pro-theism, which was what caused trouble for the above-examined anti-theistic arguments.²¹ And hence we have a route to establishing personal pro-theism that skeptical theists can make.

4.2. Skeptical Theism and Impersonal Pro-theism

Recall that impersonal pro-theism is the view that God's existence would make the world better overall. Myron Penner and Kirk Lougheed (2015) have argued for impersonal pro-theism on the grounds that God is a morally good agent, and that adding a morally good agent to a state of affairs increases its value.²² They argue as follows:

13. For any state of affairs *x*, introducing a good moral agent *S* to *x* adds value to that state of affairs unless *S* is constrained in ways that prevent *S* from exercising effective morally good agency.
14. God is a good moral agent.
15. God is not constrained in ways that prevent God from exercising effective morally good agency.
16. So, for any state of affairs *x*, introducing God to *x* adds value to that state of affairs. (Penner and Loughheed 2015, 58)

Premise (13) is supported with an example: if my car is broken down, it's a good thing for a morally good agent to stumble across me since she would try to help me—though, of course, it's possible that her trying to help me makes my situation worse (e.g., while trying to change my tire, the morally good agent ends up puncturing my spare, leaving me worse off than I was before). While their support for (13) isn't terribly strong, the premise itself seems quite plausible, so I'll grant it. Premise (14) is true by definition. And this leaves us with only one premise remaining, namely premise (15). The rest of this section will consider this premise.

Why should we think that premise (15) is true? How is it that we *know* that God is not constrained from exercising effective morally good agency?²³ It can't be on the grounds that God's agency can't be constrained, for he may very well constrain his agency in order to obtain a good (or for some other reason). Indeed, Penner and Loughheed concede this point: they hold that God might, for example, constrain his agency in order to allow for libertarian freewill. They say: God "might not be able to exercise agency that would contribute to a better state of affairs when such agency would violate human [libertarian] freedom" (2015, 59, fn 12). So, if there's some good that requires God to constrain his agency, then God will (at least possibly) constrain his agency. But then how do Penner and Loughheed show that there isn't a good that restricts God's agency? They deal with this problem by saying that from the fact that there may be some constraints on God's ability to act, it doesn't follow that he's completely constrained, nor does it follow that "God exercising agency doesn't contribute far more value to the world than finite humans (even on the assumption [that] such agency is limited in certain ways)" (2015, 59, fn 12). This is fair enough: the fact that God might be constrained in some ways doesn't entail that he's completely constrained, and it doesn't follow that the ways in which God does act don't make the world better off overall. *However*, it equally doesn't follow that God *isn't* constrained in significant ways or that the ways that God does act make the world better off overall: there might be some good, akin to libertarian freedom, that requires God to

nearly completely limit his agency, in which case he can add very little of value to the world *through exercising agency*. For example, suppose (contrary to what I have argued above) that privacy is an unsurpassable good, and that God largely restricts his knowledge in order to allow for privacy. Such a restriction (we may suppose) would greatly constrain his ability to effectively exercise agency. Indeed, it may constrain him so much that he's not able to add sufficient value to the situation to overcome the loss of privacy and other anti-theistic goods (e.g., autonomy).²⁴ In such a case, God would be constrained in such a way that he couldn't (significantly) exercise morally good agency, in which case premise (15) would be false. What this means is that, contra Penner and Loughheed, we can't just assume that some goods don't severely restrict God's agency. And this means that we can't just assume the truth of premise (15).

Given this, how could Penner and Loughheed motivate premise (15)? They would (at least) need to show that there aren't goods that require God to significantly constrain his agency. And how would they show that there aren't such goods? Presumably, they would need to infer from our lack of knowledge of a good that would require God to constrain himself to the conclusion that there is no such good. But, of course, this inference would fall prey to skeptical theism, and hence will not work. It's unclear how else one could motivate this premise, and this casts doubt on their argument: there's no clear way to motivate premise (15), and therefore we have no clear reason for accepting their argument.

4.3. How to be a Skeptical Theist *and* an Impersonal Pro-theist

While the Penner and Loughheed's argument for impersonal pro-theism was shown to ultimately fall prey to skeptical theism, there are other ways that skeptical theists can argue for impersonal pro-theism. In this section, I'll illustrate one acceptable way for skeptical theists to argue for impersonal pro-theism: I'll show that Alvin Plantinga's argument for impersonal pro-theism is immune to, and compatible with, skeptical theism. The purpose of this section isn't to defend Plantinga's argument; rather, it's merely to show that his argument doesn't succumb to skeptical theism and isn't itself obviously unsound.

Take God to be the greatest possible being: God possesses all great-making properties to the maximal degree.²⁵ One such property is *goodness*: God is *maximally* good; there is no nonlogical limit to God's goodness. This, according to Plantinga, means that any world that doesn't contain God will always be inferior in respect to value to a world that does contain God: no matter how great the creatures in a godless world act, no matter what virtues they

cultivate, relationships they create, no matter what other events occur in such a world, it will always be less valuable than a world in which God exists. This simply follows from God being maximally good; if something other than God could be more valuable than him, then there would be a nonlogical limit to his goodness. In Plantinga's words: "God himself, who is unlimited in goodness, love, knowledge, power and the like, exists in [a theistic] world; it follows, I suggest, that the value of any state of affairs in which God alone exists is itself unlimited" 2004, 9. In other words, the value of a world in which God exists is unlimited, but the value of a world in which God doesn't exist is limited. And hence worlds in which God exists will always be more valuable than worlds in which he doesn't.²⁶ Does skeptical theism undermine this argument?

The answer, I think, is a clear "No": whatever problems one might have with Plantinga's argument, it isn't relevant to skeptical theism: Plantinga is not guilty of relying on an inference from the goods (or evils) we know of to the goods (or evils) there are. Instead, he *identifies* the greatest possible (and unlimited) good, and derives his conclusion from that. Perhaps one could dispute whether God's goodness is unlimited, but that dispute will not be grounded in her skeptical theism. And hence Plantinga's argument for impersonal pro-theism is left untouched by skeptical theism. Thus, one can both endorse skeptical theism and defend impersonal pro-theism.

4.4. An Asymmetry: Why Is Skeptical Theism Compatible with Pro-theism but not Anti-theism?

While skeptical theism makes it extremely difficult to construct a case for both personal and impersonal anti-theism, it doesn't pose trouble for personal and impersonal pro-theism. What explains this asymmetry? Why is it that skeptical theism makes it difficult to make a case for personal and impersonal anti-theism but not for personal and impersonal pro-theism? The answer is that for both personal and impersonal pro-theism, there's a serious, plausible candidate for an unsurpassable pro-theistic good: namely, union with God (for personal pro-theism) and God himself (for impersonal pro-theism). This means that no inductive inference is needed on the part of the personal and impersonal pro-theist in order to argue for her position.²⁷ On the other hand, anti-theistic goods are clearly surpassable: privacy, autonomy, and so on are not plausible candidates for goods that cannot be improved upon. If the personal or impersonal anti-theist knew of a good that wasn't obviously surpassable, she might be able to construct an argument that—like (certain) pro-theistic arguments—is immune to skeptical

theism. However, as things currently stand, the prospects of this are dubious: a candidate for an unsurpassable anti-theistic good is not forthcoming. And hence we are left with an asymmetry: one can easily endorse skeptical theism and personal and impersonal pro-theism, but it's difficult to see how one can endorse skeptical theism and personal or impersonal anti-theism.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I first examined arguments for personal and impersonal anti-theism. These arguments were shown to be vulnerable to skeptical theism; they depend on an inductive inference from the goods that we know of to the goods that there are, and as such were undercut by skeptical theism. After this, I examined an argument for impersonal pro-theism, and showed that it, too, is vulnerable to skeptical theism. However, I showed that there are ways in which one can argue for both personal and impersonal pro-theism that don't rely on an inductive inference from the goods we know of to the goods we are, and hence are not vulnerable to skeptical theism. The way to do so is to, in respect to personal pro-theism, identify a pro-theistic unsurpassable good for persons; and in respect to impersonal pro-theism, one needs to identify a pro-theistic unsurpassable good *simpliciter*. Since there are plausible candidates for both types of pro-theistic unsurpassable goods, the case for pro-theism, both personal and impersonal, is not threatened by skeptical theism. This, however, results in an asymmetry between pro-theism and anti-theism: skeptical theism is compatible with the former but not (at least obviously) compatible with the latter.²⁸

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¹ Pro-theism and anti-theism (and their variants) are not exhaustive: there is also, for example, indifferentism, which holds that God’s existence wouldn’t make a difference.

² Kraay and Dragos (2013, 160) take narrow personal anti-theism to be the view that it would be *far worse* in some respect for at least some persons if God exists. The “far worse” qualification doesn’t avoid my charge of uninterestingness: in my example, Sally’s life is *far worse* in respect to her beliefs about the foundation of reality.

³ Because of this, I will omit the “wide” qualification for the remainder of this chapter: all positions spoken of should be assumed to be “wide.”

⁴ For example, Peter van Inwagen says that “it used to be widely held that evil . . . was incompatible with the existence of God: that no possible world contained both God and evil. So far as I am able to tell, this thesis is no longer defended” (1991, 135) and Trent Dougherty says that “in the late 1970s, a consensus began to emerge that Alvin Plantinga . . . had buried the so-called ‘logical problem of evil’” (2011, 560).

⁵ Goods and evils should be understood to be states of affairs.

⁶ Say that a good justifies God in allowing an instance of evil if and only if the evil occurring resulted (or will result) in a good that outweighs it, or that eliminating the evil would have brought about an evil equally bad or worse.

⁷ This assumption is no longer safe to make: it has been challenged by, for example, Hasker 2008; van Inwagen 2006; Sullivan 2013, and Rubio 2018.

⁸ See e.g. Cullison 2014; Hudson 2014, and Wykstra 1984.

⁹ SKEPTICISM is meant to track the skeptical theism of Michael Bergmann 2001, 2009, and 2012. I defend this understanding of Bergmann’s skeptical theism in Hendricks (2019).

¹⁰ I don't have the space to discuss this normative assumption. See Bergmann 2001, Hendricks (2018b) and Hudson 2014, 2017 for a discussion of it.

¹¹ It originated from Guy Kahane 2011, was elaborated and critiqued by Myron Penner 2015, further elaborated and defended by Kirk Lougheed 2017, and, finally, critiqued by Penner 2018.

¹² It is assumed in this argument that if a world W is better for S than a world W^* , that it's irrational for S to prefer W^* .

¹³ Interestingly, one could revise the objective meaningful life argument and use it to support personal pro-theism: one might argue that the meaning of at least some persons' lives depends on God's existence. And hence if God doesn't exist, their life would lack meaning and, therefore, it would be better for them if God exists. I only examine the personal anti-theist version of the argument in this section. However, the personal pro-theist version of the argument would fail for the same reasons the personal anti-theist version does.

¹⁴ See also Chris Tucker 2011, 2013.

¹⁵ Where an evil is gratuitous just in case there is no good that justifies God in allowing in, see fn 6.

¹⁶ This is why we are offered the meaningful life *argument* for personal anti-theism: it is meant to show that there really are (at least possible) persons that would have better lives if God exists. If all the personal anti-theists were trying to show was that some persons have phenomenal conservative justification for the proposition *personal anti-theism is true*, then no argument would be needed.

¹⁷ This parallels the criticism I raise of the common sense problem of evil in Hendricks 2018a.

¹⁸ By "anti-theistic goods" I mean goods that only come about if God doesn't exist.

¹⁹ This is the route that Lougheed forthcoming considers and ultimately deems unsatisfactory (for different reasons).

²⁰ See e.g. Kahane 2011; Lougheed 2017, 2018; Hendricks and Lougheed 2019, and Stephen Davis 2014.

²¹ If one could show that it's surpassable or not a plausible candidate for an unsurpassable good for persons, then skeptical theism might undermine it. But, again, this hasn't been done.

²² They think that their argument establishes all types of pro-theism. While I focus on impersonal pro-theism, my criticism holds for personal pro-theism as well.

²³ Since God is by definition morally good, I will simply speak of his agency from here on out, instead of his "morally good agency."

²⁴ It's crucial to keep in mind that the good of privacy in this scenario is not to be attributed to God's agency: the good of privacy is not something that God brings about by his actions or that is the result of God existing. And so the good of privacy is not attributed to God's existence and cannot be used to support impersonal pro-theism.

²⁵ Or, following Nagasawa 2017, we might say that God possesses the maximal consistent set of great-making properties.

²⁶ The bulk of Plantinga's chapter is spent arguing that the best possible worlds contain incarnation and atonement, which require sin and therefore evil. And hence God allows evil because it is necessary if there is to be incarnation and atonement. I will not discuss part of his argument, since it isn't necessary for my point here. However, it is noteworthy that Hudson 2018 has argued that this specific claim of Plantinga's theodicy succumbs to skeptical theism. (Hudson's argument only applies (if at all) to Plantinga's theodicy, not to the above argument that I consider.)

²⁷ Though, as we saw earlier, Penner and Lougheed's argument for impersonal pro-theism does fall prey to skeptical theism.

²⁸ Thanks to Adriane Hendricks and Kirk Lougheed for comments on this chapter. And thanks especially to G.L.G.—Colin Patrick Mitchell—for particularly insightful comments.