

SHOULD WE WANT GOD NOT TO EXIST?

Morgan Luck and Nathan Ellerby

Abstract: In his book, *The Last Word*, Thomas Nagel expresses the hope that there exists no God. Guy Kahane, in his paper 'Should We Want God to Exist?', attempts to defend Nagel from an argument that concludes such a hope may be impermissible. In this paper we present a new defense for the hope that God does not exist.

1. INTRODUCTION

In his book, *The Last Word*, Thomas Nagel writes,

I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that.¹

In this paper we are concerned, neither with why Nagel hopes there is no God, nor indeed with Nagel in particular, but rather whether it is permissible for anyone to hope such a thing.

The following principle provides a reason why it might be impermissible to hope for something:

The impermissible hope principle (IHP): If someone believes that [not p is worse than p] then it is impermissible for them to hope that [not p rather than p].

The impermissible hope principle (or IHP) seems plausible enough in normal circumstances. Crudely put, it suggests that people shouldn't hope for what they think is worse. So, for example, if Jim believes it would be worse for his sister not to recover from her illness (rather than to recover), then it would be wrong for Jim to hope she doesn't recover from her illness (rather than recover).

*Morgan Luck and Nathan Ellerby, School of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Charles Sturt University, New South Wales, Australia*

Building on IHP, Guy Kahane's paper "Should We Want God to Exist?"² considers an argument for why hoping God doesn't exist might be considered impermissible.³ Although Kahane does not explicitly formulate this argument, it can be understood as follows:

- (IHP) If some person believes that [not p is worse than p] then it is impermissible for them to hope that [not p rather than p].
 (1) Some person believes that [God does not exist, is worse than God does exist].
 Therefore,
 (2) It is impermissible for this person to hope that [God does not exist, rather than God does exist].

If (IHP) is true, it will be impermissible for someone to hope God doesn't exist, whilst also believing it would be better if he did exist. And unfortunately for people like Nagel, there are numerous arguments for why we *should* believe it would be better if God exists.

It is common to come across arguments for why God's existence should be considered better than his non-existence. For example, it is often said that if God exists he would establish a system of divine justice,⁴ or his divine commands would ground a system of objective morality,⁵ or his very presence would have infinite value⁶; and that such states could not attain without God, and it would be better if they attained. If such arguments are good then there would be reason to think that any suitably informed person who didn't believe it would be worse if God didn't exist (i.e. where (1) is false) could be accused of irrationality.

Kahane defends Nagel by suggesting (1) might be false without the relevant person being irrational. In other words, he attempts to provide rational grounds for people like Nagel to believe that things would be worse, rather than better, if God exists.

Kahane suggests that if God exists things might be worse in one of two ways: either in certain respects (e.g. we would never have complete independence, a complete understanding, complete privacy, and/or genuine solitude if there exists a God); or from a personal standpoint, that is,

If a striving for independence, understanding, privacy and solitude is so inextricably woven into my identity that its curtailment by God's existence would not merely make my life worse but rob it of meaning, then perhaps I can reasonably prefer that God not exist.⁷

We will not comment here on whether Kahane's defense is successful. Rather we shall assume the truth of (1) for the sake of argument. Instead we will present both a counter-example and counter-argument against (IHP). The conclusion to this argument is that it is not necessarily wrong for someone to hope that there exists no God, whilst also believing things would be worse if there exists no God, providing they:

- do not believe with complete certainty that things would be worse if there exists no God; and
- hope that things would not be worse if there exists no God.

2. A COUNTER-EXAMPLE TO (IHP)

Before presenting an argument against (IHP), let us first consider a counter-example. Consider the following case:

Jim believes that his sick sister needs to take a new wonder drug in order to recover. He believes this because he has been reliably told that without taking the drug her recovery is extremely unlikely (the only chance being a one in a million unexplainable spontaneous recovery), but with the drug she is certain to live. Because of this Jim (inductively) forms the belief that it would be worse for his sister not to take the drug.

However, the drug is very expensive, and Jim and his sister are very poor. Jim hopes that she will spontaneously recover before they need to spend their life savings on the medication (although he is well aware this is extremely unlikely, and he is completely prepared to spend all their money on the drug as soon as the doctors say it is time). It is on the off-chance that his hope of spontaneous recovery is fulfilled that he hopes that his sister doesn't take the wonder drug.

This case has three salient features. First, Jim believes that things would be worse if his sister does not take the drug. He believes this because he is convinced it is very likely. We are here working on the assumption that it is rational to believe something if you think it is very likely, but not certain, to be true. For example, it may be rational for someone to believe they will go to work tomorrow, despite the fact that they also believe there is an extremely small chance their house will be struck by a deadly asteroid as they sleep. (We shall entertain an objection to this assumption later in the paper.) Second, given Jim's hope that his sister will spontaneously recover, he hopes his sister does not take the drug. Third, it does not seem wrong for Jim to hope that his sister does not take the drug, given that he also hopes she spontaneously recovers before needing it. In other words:

Jim believes that his sister not taking the drug is worse than her taking it; but Jim hopes that his sister does not take the drug, rather than does take it; and this hope does not seem impermissible.

If you have the intuition in this case that it is not wrong for Jim to hope that his sister does not take the drug, despite him also believing that things would be worse if she does not, then you have reason to be suspicious of (IHP). For both (IHP) and these intuitions are at odds. However, if you are not moved by these intuitions, or suspect the case is sophistic, consider next an argument for the rejection of (IHP).

3. A COUNTER-ARGUMENT TO (IHP)

The counter-example given in the previous section might have the following principle working in the background:

The permissible hope principle (PHP): If some person hopes that [not p rather than p], because of their hope that [not p is not worse than p], then it is permissible for them to hope that [not p rather than p].

Crudely put, the permissible hope principle (or PHP) suggests it is okay to hope for what you hope is best. For example, given that Jim hopes his sister doesn't take the drug (rather than does), because of his hope that she spontaneously recovers (that is, where not taking the drug is not worse than taking it), then it seems permissible for Jim to hope his sister doesn't take the drug (rather than does).

Note also that the term *because* in the above principle links the two hopes together in a particular way. It is intended to suggest that the first hope is embedded in, or occurs in the context of, the second. In other words, the two hopes are not simply conjoined; one is also conditional on the other.

Now consider the following argument that builds upon (PHP):

(PHP) If some person hopes that [not p rather than p], because of their hope that [not p is not worse than p], then it is permissible for them to hope that [not p rather than p].

(4) Some person hopes that [God does not exist, rather than God does exist], because of their hope that [God does not exist, is not worse than God does exist].

Therefore,

(5) It is permissible for this person to hope that [God does not exist, rather than God exists].

Just as we previously assumed (1) was true, let us now assume the truth of (4). (5) directly contradicts (2). And if (5) and (1) are true then (IHP) must be false. In other words, if (PHP) is true then (IHP) must be false. The two principles are in conflict.

Let us now examine some objections to this counter-argument.

4. OBJECTION 1

A possible objection to (PHP) might run as follows. As it is far more likely that the wonder drug is able to help Jim's sister, rather than some spontaneous recovery, doesn't it make more sense for him to hope she takes it?

This response might have traction if we were discussing beliefs. Suppose, for example, that you buy a lottery ticket knowing full well that there is only a one in a million chance of winning the jackpot. Forming the belief that you will win the jackpot seems irrational given what you know. However, does that mean you shouldn't hope to win? Should you instead hope to lose because this is what is more likely? Surely not.

However, perhaps this isn't a fair analogy. Consider then the following more nuanced case:

Abe and Ben both campaign to lower carbon emissions, because they both believe this is the most likely way to save the planet. However, whilst Abe hopes it is their campaigning that will save the planet, Ben hopes that it is the discovery of a clean energy source that will save the planet.

Although Ben is hoping for what is less likely, this doesn't seem obviously impermissible. Rather what seems morally salient is that Ben is hoping for

the best. When forming beliefs it seems right that Ben favor those which are more likely to be true. And indeed when determining what action to perform one should also heed such likelihoods (as Ben does). Yet when forming hopes it does not seem that likelihoods play the same role.

5. OBJECTION 2

A second possible objection might run as follows. Consider the following rather odd hope.

Hannibal hopes that murder turns out to be a good thing.

Why might Hannibal hope this? Well if murder turns out to be good, then the world would be a better place than had murder remained, as we had thought, bad. For all the murders that had occurred would now be good things. Given this hope, is it now acceptable for Hannibal to hope everyone gets murdered? If you think not, then it seems that you may have grounds for rejecting (PHP).

However, some care has to be taken here. Hannibal is not hoping everyone gets murdered if murder is bad. Rather he is hoping for two necessarily connected things: he is hoping everyone gets murdered because he also hopes murder is a good thing. Given this, the hope that everyone gets murdered shouldn't carry with it the same negative overtones that we normally associate with the act.

Similarly, Jim does not hope that his sister doesn't take the drug if she will die as a result. Rather he is hoping for two necessarily connected things: he hopes that his sister doesn't take the drug because he also hopes she will recover without it.

Likewise, people like Nagel may hope analogously: they might hope that there exists no God because they also hope that things would not be worse if there exists no God.

6. OBJECTION 3

For the sake of argument we have assumed the truth of (1) and (4). But is it possible for (1) and (4) to both be true?

- (1) Some person believes that [God does not exist, is worse than God does exist]
- (4) Some person hopes that . . . [God does not exist, is *not* worse than God does exist]

This seems to involve hoping that things would not be worse if God doesn't exist, but believing otherwise. Is such a thing possible? In other words, can one hope that x but believe that not x ? Well this may depend on the type of belief.

Let us start with a belief you are completely certain of. Let us assume you are completely certain that you will never see a square circle. Can you believe this and yet still hope to see one? If the answer is yes, then it seems possible to hope that x , whilst also believing that not x —a result which would deflate this particular objection.

However, perhaps the answer is no: you cannot believe with complete certainty that you will never see a square circle whilst still hoping to see one. In other words, in order to hope that x , you must believe that x is possible. In which case, if you are certain that x is impossible you can't hope for it.

On this reading Jim could not believe with certainty that the wonder drug is *necessary* for his sister's recovery, whilst also hoping that she gets better without it. For the hope that she will get better without the drug will entail the belief that she can, which would contradict the certain belief she can't. Yet what if Jim was not certain that the drug was necessary for his sister's recovery? What if, as we stipulated in the original case, Jim is pretty sure, but not completely sure, of the necessity of the drug.

It seems that if you allow for the slightest possibility of something, it is possible for you to hope for it. Likewise, it seems that in many cases if something is very likely to be true then you are justified in believing it. For example, if we were to buy you a lottery ticket with a one in a million chance of winning it would be justifiable for you to believe you will lose, whilst also being justifiable for you to hope that you will win. Thus it seems that provided you are not certain of x , although you may believe x , it is still possible for you hope that not x —a result that supports (PHP). What is more, such doubt seems warranted.

It doesn't seem prudent to believe with absolute certainty that things would be worse if God didn't exist. We don't mean to suggest here that the one shouldn't believe that things would be worse—it may indeed be the most rational thing to believe. Only that to believe this with the same certainty that $1 + 1 = 2$ seems remarkable. In other words, it would not be irrational for someone who believed that the world would be worse without God, to believe this with near, but not complete, certainty. Perhaps, someone gifted with a supreme intellect might be justified in being certain beyond all doubt, but for most of us, a modicum of uncertainty will be more appropriate.

7. OBJECTION 4

As stated in section 2, the argument presented here operates on the assumption that it is rationally permissible for you to believe something if you think it is very likely to be true, despite the fact that you are not completely certain it is. So, if someone thinks it is very likely that the world would be better if there is a God, although they are not certain of this, then it is rational for them to believe that the world would be better if there is a God. One might object to this assumption. One might think it odd, or indeed impossible, to both believe there is a chance something might be false, whilst also believing it is true. If you have this type objection in mind, note that the argument can be adjusted to meet your concerns in the following way.

Rather than believing that things would be better if there is a God, because this seems very likely to be true, one alternative would be to merely believe it is very likely that things would be better if there is a God. The dif-

ference is subtle. In the former case one believes x because one thinks x is very likely to be true. The alternative is that one just believes x is very likely to be true, without forming the belief that x . So, if one is suspicious of people believing things that they are not certain of, then our modified conclusion would be as follows: it is not morally wrong to hope that there exists no God, whilst also believing it is very likely that things would be worse if there exists no God, providing you: do not believe with complete certainty that things would be worse if there exists no God; and you hope that things would not be worse if there exists no God.

Of course with this adjustment in place we are now, like Kahane, attacking (1). However, whereas Kahane attacks this premise on the basis that things might be worse if there exists a God, we are here suggesting that it may be permissible (or indeed warranted) for someone like Nagel to simply believe it is very likely that things would be worse if there exists no God, rather than forming the belief that things would be worse if there exists no God.

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper we examined an argument for why it might be morally wrong for someone to hope that there exists no God. Unlike Kahane, who defends this hope by arguing one need not believe that things would be worse if there exists no God, we have presented a defence that does not rely on this conclusion.

The argument presented here suggests that providing one does not believe with complete certainty that things would be worse if there exists no God, and one hopes that things would not be worse if there exists no God, it would not be morally wrong to hope that there exists no God (at least not for the reasons examined here).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks to Graeme McLean (whose work inspired this paper), and to Wylie Breckenridge and Daniel Cohen for their input into this paper.

NOTES

1. Nagel, T. *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 130.
2. Kahane, G. "Should We Want God To Exist?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 82.2 (2011): 674–696.
3. This type of argument is also considered in Graeme McLean's paper "The Will to Disbelieve" (presented at the 2009 *Australasian Philosophy of Religion Conference*) and his paper "On Wanting God Not to Exist" (presented at the 2010 *Australasian Philosophy of Religion Conference*).
4. Crisp, O. "Divine Retribution: A Defence," *Sophia* 42.1 (2003): 35–52.
5. Baggett, D., and J. Walls. *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
6. Davidson, I., and I. Rae. *God of Salvation: Soteriology in Theological Perspective* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011).
7. Kahane, "Should We Want God To Exist?" p. 691.