

## **A reason for apatheism**

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### **Abstract**

In a recent paper, Trevor Hedberg and Jordan Huzarevich assessed a number of objections against practical apatheism, concluding that they are either unsuccessful or at least very controversial. The aim of this discussion note is to contribute to their discussion by presenting and analysing a short argument for a reason in favor of apatheism; one that appeals to a particular universalist formulation of the thesis of theodical individualism. After briefly introducing a distinction between a particular and a universal version of apatheism, I present the argument, assess its merits in light of some objections to it, I conclude that at least one reason in favor of a particular practical apatheistic position is warranted by it. Finally, I suggest some alternative reasons that could be advanced in favor of apatheism, and I distinguish between strong and weak forms of apatheism.

**Keywords:** Philosophy of religion. Apatheism. Indifferentism. Universalism. Trevor Hedberg. Jordan Huzarevich.

In ordinary discourse atheism is characterized as an apathetic attitude towards God, and toward supernatural entities and processes more broadly. Within contemporary philosophy of religion, it refers to the belief that *the existential question concerning God's existence is of no practical and/or intellectual significance*. An atheist, therefore, “believes that we should not care whether God exists” (HEDBERG, HUZAREVICH, 2017, p. 259). Recently, Trevor Hedberg and Jordan Huzarevich have assessed six objections directed against practical atheism – the claim that the questions concerning God's existence are of no practical significance<sup>1</sup> – and concluded that five of them are unsuccessful and one, though arguably more successful than the others, is nonetheless highly controversial, leaving them to conclude that no persuasive reason has been brought so far in favor of caring whether God exists.

Despite a brief mention of Robert McKim's (2001) discussion of divine hiddenness, we find in their discussion no attempts being made at formulating a proper argument *in favor* of atheism, intellectual or practical; this is expected, given that that was not the aim of their paper. Having said that, however, I believe a short argument can be made for a reason in favor of practical atheism. Its weakest conclusion – call it a reason for *particular* practical atheism – is that the question of God's existence is of no practical significance to a certain individual or group; its strongest conclusion – call it a reason for *universal* practical atheism – extends this lack of practical significance, not

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<sup>1</sup> Practical atheism is distinguished from intellectual atheism – which claims that such questions are of no intellectual value only. Being a practical atheist does not necessarily makes one an intellectual atheist, and vice-versa; cf. (HEDBERG, HUZAREVICH, 2017, p. 269). Though clarifying, this distinction overlooks some other forms of atheism that fit into neither category, as I suggest below; cf. p.

only to an individual or group, but to anyone; accordingly, they have a good reason not to care about the question, and not to care whether they should regulate their behavior according to belief in God. By “God” I’m referring to a Christian conception according to which God is an individual who is omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, has these features necessarily, has created and sustains the world, and that necessarily loves every person created. I do not take this to be a definitive conception (though it is a highly popular one), and I aim only at showing that the answers to questions concerning the existence of such a being have no practical significance to us. In discussing the argument and its merits I hope to contribute to atheism discussion by stimulating further inquiry into what I believe to be a still largely unexplored conceptual territory within contemporary philosophy of religion.

Here's the argument:

P1 God permits involuntary, deserved and undeserved human suffering only if such suffering ultimately produces a benefit for the sufferer;<sup>2</sup>

P2 If (P1), then no matter how many evils one suffers or causes other people to suffer, God will make it that it ultimately produces a benefit for him;

P3 If no matter how many evils one suffers or causes other people to suffer, God will make it that it ultimately produces a benefit for him, then there is a reason to think that whether one should care about believing in God and act in accordance with that belief is of no practical significance to him;

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<sup>2</sup> But, in case no benefit could be produced for the sufferer from some suffering, God would prevent the suffering from occurring at all.

C1 If (P1), then there is a reason to think that whether one should care about believing in God and act in accordance with that belief is of no practical significance to him; (from P2, P3)

C2 There is a reason to think that whether one should care about believing in God and act in accordance with that belief is of no practical significance to him. (from P1, C1)

Premise 1 is a *universalist*<sup>3</sup> formulation of the thesis of theodical individualism, and I take it that it follows from my aforementioned Christian conception of God. From this premise it follows that even if you act against God's prescriptions, you will be ultimately *compensated* by the benefits produced from any suffering that will follow from such acting.<sup>4</sup> The intuition behind (P3) is this. Whether or not all of our suffering is pointless or part of God's ultimate purpose for us; whether this plan involves us being eternally punished by him for committing actions considered sinful, wrong, and unrepentable; for advancing belief in his nonexistence, or maybe simply by not recognizing any reason to believe in his existence; all of this while others are being blessed with eternal life in heaven by His side for avoiding those actions and following His imperatives – these are all concerns that might shape our practical lives and have direct consequence on what we are doing now. The basic reason for this is that we want

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<sup>3</sup> I define “universalism” *simpliciter* as the view according to which every sentient being will be saved in the afterlife. *Theist* universalism in particular understands that every sentient being will be saved by God, by being completely purged of sin and sent to eternal, blissful life in heaven.

<sup>4</sup> Theodical individualism – even in its non-universalist formulation – is a minority view within contemporary philosophy of religion, but it has been thoroughly defended by a number of philosophers; cf. Jordan (2004, p. 172, note 13). It has also been featured as a central premise in arguments in favor of atheism (MAITZEN, 2009), as well as anti-theism in the axiology of theism discussion (WIELENBERG, 2018).

to avoid as much as possible any justification for our eternal punishment for any of those actions – even if that punishment is ultimately justified.<sup>5</sup> Even if we didn't follow God's imperatives after realizing this, and even if we agree to be punished for all eternity for our sins, the point still stands that avoiding or committing them will have massive consequences for our lives, and that we have good reason to change our behavior, lest we suffer in the afterlife and miss all the blissful goods of heaven and God's company.<sup>6</sup> But according to the argument, supposing God exists, you won't receive less benefits from him if you've lived your whole life deviating from his commandments, committing sinful actions, advocating belief in his nonexistence or simply not believing in his existence. From the perspective we're looking from, it seems there is no rationally compelling reason for you to change your practices according to theistic belief, were God to exist – indeed, there is a positive reason *not* to care about such changes.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, that's a very controversial assumption, but even rejecting it won't imply the rejection of any form of atheism; indeed, I believe one version of atheism survive this rejection; cf. p 9-10.

<sup>6</sup> The case of nonbelief is controversial, since, supposing lack of belief does not preclude one from being in a loving relationship with God, it never ultimately constitutes a harm to ourselves; cf. Cullison (2010) for some arguments against belief as a condition for participating in such a relationship.

<sup>7</sup> The argument's reasoning might explain Hedberg and Huzarevich's (2017, p. 263) suspicion that universalists might be sympathetic to atheism, as well as the practical worry that universalism leads to "moral and religion relaxation" (ADAMS, 1993, p. 235). Indeed, sincere atheism may lead one to care less and less about acting in accordance with their faith, perhaps even to the point of not caring about attending rituals and trying to convince others that their religion is true and sinning when doing in it avoids earthly suffering; cf. Lancaster-Thomas (2023, p. 11) and Mawson (2023). It might be objected that awareness of the nature of sin might be so strong that no consistent theist would even attempt at committing it, but I have a hard time finding this intuitively plausible. First, many believers already do seem to recognize the evil nature of their sins and still commit them (perhaps due to weakness of will). Second, if you're aware that God will compensate you with an infinite benefit after death no matter how many sins

It might initially seem perplexing that no defender of theodical individualism has advanced this strategy before, but there is at least one clear reason for this. Many if not most of them would reject my universalist version due to the commonly shared thought that, while God would certainly permit suffering only if some benefit would be ultimately produced for the sufferer, this only applies to *undeserved* suffering.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it is a common conception within classical theism that a just God would punish at least some actions that cause suffering to others and therefore make the agent deserving of the punishment; accordingly, some people may suffer because they are being justly punished by God. But this leads to an objection against my argument: if it is the case that God permits some suffering which does not ultimately produce a benefit for the sufferer because he is being rightly punished, as long as one is concerned with avoiding deserved punishment then there's one obvious reason to care whether God exists.

I'm aware that universalism is a position most contemporary philosophers of religion are not inclined to accept. I find that most of those who accept it derive it from their defense of so called "*soul-making*" theodicies (such as John Hick's (2010)) as the best response to the existence of evil in a world created by God. According to its rough picture, we were created imperfectly with the purpose of eventually an ultimate state of moral perfection and communion with God, which he lets us freely choose to follow or

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you're going to commit or how horrible they are, how could the mere awareness of their evil nature trump the benefit awareness and thus motivate you against committing it?

It might be further objected that, even if universalism is true, you shouldn't commit sinful actions because of their evil nature. But whether we *should* commit sins in spite of God compensating for our evils is a different question that would have to be dealt with elsewhere.

<sup>8</sup> Thus, my formulation of theodical individualism differs from Maitzen's, as well as Erik Wielenberg's (2018), which restrict suffering to *undeserved* suffering.

not by distancing himself from the world. A crucial component to such theodicies which explains this distancing is that the experience of evil in our earthly lives is eschatologically justified, as they are a necessary component for our moral development towards that ultimate state.<sup>9</sup> This leads to the thought that, since many of us at the end of our lives won't have been yet developed to the point of achieving that state, and since God's all-loving nature implies that his purpose with us cannot be left unfulfilled, there must be an afterlife created by God, in which we are capable of further progressing towards that state on our own will. And this means that there can be no eternal punishment for anyone<sup>10</sup>, since it would leave that purpose unfulfilled and fill us with gratuitous suffering<sup>11</sup>. So instead, there must be some extended purgatory state, or a succession of different purgatory states through which we live and suffer until we finally reach perfection. This reasoning is able to show that all the suffering that might come to us both in life and afterlife turns out to be not only ultimately compensated but also *justified* and therefore never pointless. If this is correct, then someone who thinks soul-making theodicies are

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Talbott (2001, p. 104) goes as far as to suggest that God's hiddenness, as well as the evils we ordinarily experience in this life, are metaphysical conditions for our development of our rational capacities, as well as our sense of freedom, without which we wouldn't be able to experience God's full revelation. As for the objection that God could have created us as saints from the start, his response boils down to the intuition that life in such an imagined world would be "less worthwhile" than a life of struggle and learning from experience (Ibid., p. 107).

<sup>10</sup> This doesn't mean that we have to necessarily reject the existence of hell, only the doctrine that we are sent there for eternal punishment. If something like Hick's view is right, then hell might exist, but it will always be empty. It could also be the case that we are only *temporarily* sent to hell for purgatorial reasons (TALBOTT, 2001, p. 104).

<sup>11</sup> It also seems to imply the rejection of annihilationism, since complete extinction at the end of the process would still leave God's purpose unfulfilled.

the most consistent ones would therefore think that, if God exists, then he will compensate for our suffering.

Another motivation might have to do with Thomas Talbott's (1990) contention that the existence of an all-loving, omnibenevolent, omniscient and omnipotent God is logically incompatible with the doctrines of divine rejection and everlasting punishment; that such God, being necessarily so, could not love some created persons and not all, or save only some of them while damning others for eternity; therefore, that He would have to guarantee salvation and heavenly bliss even to the most damned created persons. This reasoning leads Talbott to conclude that "*any* form of theism that includes the traditional doctrine of hell, even one that tries to preserve consistency by denying the love of God, is in fact logically inconsistent" (Ibid., p. 19).

Although I am inclined to accept universalism, I will not develop these views and the arguments in favor of them any further; for the purposes of my paper, it's sufficient to show that they are not obviously absurd positions given that it has been extensively developed and defended by forceful arguments.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> It might be objected against Talbott's argument form inconsistency that it is insufficient, for it implies only that God won't inflict one sort of suffering (hell) to us, even if deserved, and not that he will compensate all sufferers for *any* sort of suffering. But I think this doesn't appreciate Talbott's point about God's love: it is difficult to see how, if God is all-loving, and this love implies that He will fill the purpose of ultimately reconciling with his creatures, He could fail to fulfill it. It is understood that this reconciliation is one benefit that will trump any evil suffered or caused by anyone. So I'm inclined to think that his argument does imply that he will also compensate all sufferers for any evil they suffered or caused, deserved or not.

In any case, even if the objector is unconvinced by this response and concludes that deserved suffering is a reason for caring about the existence of God, he'll still have to convince the apatheist that we



Should we then conclude that we have a reason for practical atheism? Before we get ahead of ourselves, we need to know exactly *which* version of it is warranted by the argument. I want to turn to what I think is a very pressing objection against practical atheism – one that does not depend on accepting or rejecting universalism. If God exists, then my suffering will be ultimately compensated by some benefit produced by it. But then if God *doesn't* exist, this is false: there's no guarantee that my suffering will ever be ultimately compensated by some benefit. So ultimately compensated suffering is reason to care about God's existence; we do care whether our suffering is gratuitous or is a part of an ultimate being's benevolent plan.

In response to this, one might reject the implication brought by the argument. One might argue that, instead of God, some impersonal Karmic mechanism would ultimately compensate for the suffering of everyone; it might do this by making them live through repeated processes of reincarnation that are directive to a state of divine, infinite bliss.<sup>13</sup> If this is correct, then it is not the case at all that our suffering won't be ultimately compensated by some benefit in case God doesn't exist. I'm not sure of anyone who has extensively defended this idea (which also requires not only a defense of reincarnation, but also a theory explaining a connection between the suffering and subsequent benefit that *justifies* the suffering, and not only compensates it), let alone consider it plausible.

Regardless, this response will not do. To see this, consider these two propositions:

1a. If X exists, then it is *certain* that you will ultimately receive a great benefit;

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are capable of ascertaining the right beliefs and attitudes to adopt in order to avoid God's punishment (cf. HEDBERG, HUZAREVICH, 2016, p. 272).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Kahane (2018, p. 102) for a similar point applied to anti-theist discussion.

2a. If X doesn't exist, then it is *possible* that you will ultimately receive a great benefit.

It's clear that if both are true, then X's existence is a matter of practical significance. The same reasoning applies to existential questions concerning God:

1b. If God exists, then it is *certain* that you will ultimately receive a great benefit that will compensate for all your suffering;

2b. If God doesn't exist, then it is still *possible* that you will ultimately receive a great benefit that will compensate for all your suffering.

If both of these are true, then whether God exists is a matter of practical significance.

I partly concede the argument. On the one hand, it is a serious objection against the plausibility of universal atheism, to which I don't know to respond; for it seems that the response will only convince those already inclined to believe in, or certain of, this non-theistic brand of universalism.<sup>14</sup> So I'm forced to conclude that universal atheism is not warranted by the universalist argument.

On the other hand, this still leaves space for the possibility of particular atheism. If a non-theistic universalist already agrees with Talbott (1990, p. 19) that "*any* form of theism that includes the traditional doctrine of hell, even one that tries to preserve consistency by denying the love of God, is in fact logically inconsistent" (without

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<sup>14</sup> To make matters even more restrained, consider that we might also care about the absence of a *personal* divine agent, in spite of no loss of benefits in life created and ruled by an *impersonal* divine process. This could be motivated by the belief that such a process is incapable of being in a loving relationship with us, which is a situation we might dread.

necessarily agreeing with him about the truth of theism), then he has a reason to think that questions concerning God's existence have no practical significance to him. This means that at least one reason for particular practical atheism is tenable.

This isn't to say that there aren't any other reasons that might be given for it; let me briefly mention some of them. One might argue for atheism on the basis that existential questions concerning God's existence are at bottom pseudo-questions because they involve concepts devoid of any factual meaning (MARTIN, 1997). One might also argue in a skeptical theistic fashion that, even if God exists, and he punishes those who deserve to suffer, we will never be able to ascertain which beliefs and attitudes to adopt in order to escape punishment.<sup>15</sup> It can even be said that, beyond Hedberg and Huzarevich's taxonomy of practical and intellectual atheism,<sup>16</sup> a third, *moral* sort of atheism has been defended by Nietzsche. It is my understanding that underlying his cry for indifference towards theological questions – as well as traditional metaphysical questions (cf. WS 16) – is a skeptic attitude towards the prospect of answering those questions through *a priori* philosophical speculation (cf. HH I 9). However, what drives

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<sup>15</sup> As I mentioned in a previous footnote, Hedberg and Huzarevich (2016, p. 272) have already put forth the problem of belief ascertainment as a challenge to anti-atheists.

<sup>16</sup> There's an even broader concern about how the atheist dispute is framed by Hedberg and Huzarevich. Whether or not this was their intention, the paper gives the impression that the dispute is solely between atheism and anti-atheism. But this picture might be too simplistic. Suppose one argues that, since caring is a form of worry and worry is ultimately an involuntary feeling, it doesn't make sense to ask whether we should care or not about existential questions concerning God's existence. Leaving aside questions about the argument's success, it's easy to notice that such a person would be defending a kind of quietism about the discussion. So there is at least one other conceptual possibility available within the atheism spectrum other than atheism and anti-atheism that might be worth developing, and that Hedberg and Huzarevich overlooked in their paper.

his skepticism towards apatheism is ultimately his ethical outlook: insistence on adjudicating these impenetrable questions perpetuates arrogant dogmatic behavior and betrays an obsessive need for convictions (or “faith”), which for him is symptomatic of decadence and cultural inferiority, which go against his perfectionist intellectual and cultural ideals of skepticism, suspension of judgement and epistemic humility; cf. HH I 2, 630, 632; BGE preface, 25; AC 52; TI 8.6; EH 1.1. Thus, even if ultimately the existence of God has *some* practical or intellectual significance to our lives, we will never be able to settle questions about his existence; to the extent that we care about cultivating what is best in us, we *should* avoid caring about those questions. While interesting and potentially valuable, a careful analysis of these arguments is beyond the scope of this paper and will have to be done elsewhere.

Finally, some conceptual clarification. To say that someone has a reason in favor of apatheism it's not to say that they have a *conclusive* reason. The argument for a reason in favor of apatheism constitutes *one* consideration in favor of apatheism for at least a certain group of people, which is based on suffering. Some people may think that there are probably many reasons unrelated to suffering that, when weighted with the reason(s) one has for apatheism, might drive them to reject it. To treat the reason(s) one has for apatheism as conclusive or overriding compared to competing reasons is to be a *strong* apatheist, while to treat it as defeasible reason(s) when weighted with competing reasons is to be a *weak apatheist*. If someone is a weak apatheist, then they might need other reasons to convince themselves of the insignificance of questions concerning God's existence. I suspend my judgement on where exactly the reason I presented for apatheism falls within this distinction.

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