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Holm Tetens on the Moral-Existential Argument for Theism: Reasonable Hope and Wishful Thinking

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Summary: Holm Tetens develops in his book „Gott denken. Ein Versuch über rationale Theologie“ theoretical and practical arguments against a naturalistic and in favour of a theistic understanding of reality. In my paper I focus on Teten's claim that we are rationally justified to hope for the truth of classical theism. I distinguish between rationally justified and unjustified forms of hope and argue that we are rationally justified to hope for the redemption of reality as promised by classical theism. However, this hope has a weaker basis of justification than Tetens seems to assume because serious objections to classical theism ought to be taken into consideration as well.

Keywords: theism, naturalism, hope

Zusammenfassung: Holm Tetens präsentiert in seinem Büchlein „Gott denken. Ein Versuch über rationale Theologie“ theoretische und praktische Argumente gegen eine naturalistische und zugunsten einer theistischen Deutung der Wirklichkeit. In meinem Aufsatz gehe ich auf Tetens Argumentation ein, dass wir rational gerechtfertigt sind, auf die Wahrheit des Theismus zu hoffen. Dabei unterscheide ich zwischen gerechtfertigten und nicht gerechtfertigten Formen des Hoffens. Ich argumentiere, dass wir als rationale Wesen zwar auf die Wahrheit des klassischen Theismus und somit die Erlösung der Welt durch Gott hoffen können. Allerdings dürfte diese Hoffnung eine schwächere Rechtfertigungsgrundlage haben als Tetens anzunehmen scheint, da gewichtige Einwände gegen den klassischen Theismus berücksichtigt werden müssen.

Schlüsselwörter: Theismus, Naturalismus, Hoffnung

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I Introduction

In his recent book "Thinking [about] God. An Essay in Rational Theology" (Gott denken. Ein Versuch über rationale Theologie) the philosopher Holm Tetens presents two bold claims.[1] In the first part of the book he argues that a naturalistic outlook on reality is not explanatory superior, from a theoretical perspective, to its theistic alternative. On the contrary, theism is better suited to explain the facts that the natural world is ordered and that human beings are embodied rational and free subjects.[2]

In the second part of the book he argues that from a naturalistic perspective all the evils and goods performed throughout human history will forever be forgotten at some future point in time because cosmological theory tells us that all life will vanish from the universe. Naturalism leaves no room for a view of ultimate justice, compensation and redemption. As such this view is morally and existentially highly unsatisfying. Theism, by contrast, offers a more positive perspective, because an integral component to theism is the hope for a final eschatological redemption and for the ultimate transformation of our lives toward the good. Theism, if true, would therefore be morally and existentially preferable to naturalism. Are we justified in placing our hope in theism? This is the question I will address as follows:

First I present Tetens' moral-existential argument against naturalism. The crucial premise of this argument concerns the thesis that hope in theism is reasonable – in fact, more reasonable than naturalism. In turn, I discuss what might distinguish reasonable hope from wishful thinking. The upshot of my analysis will be that reasonable hope is context-sensitive: one person's reasonable hope will be another person's unjustified wishful thinking. The reason for the discrepancy is each person's respective background beliefs or worldviews. After a brief characterization of a worldview and its epistemic peculiarities, I conclude by arguing that hope in theism is reasonable. However, I think that the rationality of hope in theism is weaker than Tetens suggests because there are serious defeaters to theism which do not afflict naturalism.

1 Many thanks to Katherine Dormandy for precise and critical comments on an earlier draft of this paper and students of mine for pressing hard about how to differentiate between reasonable hope and mere wishful thinking.

2 Tetens (2015) concludes on 54: "Die theistische Kernthese stellt mit Blick auf das Verhältnis des Geistigen zum Materiellen und angesichts der faktischen empirischen Resultate eine stärkere Möglichkeit dar als die naturalistische Kernthese."

II Tetens's Moral-Existential Argument

Here is a summary of the argument which Tetens advances in the second part of his book:[3]

I Each human person is ensnared in the evils of this world, both as a perpetrator and as a victim. (premise)

II There is no this-worldly power, including individual or collective human action, that is capable of overcoming the evils of this world once and for all. (premise)

III If there is any power at all that can overcome the evils of this world once and for all, then it is a transworldly, or say, transcendent power. (implication from II)

IV Traditionally, the classical theistic God is conceived of as such a transcendent power. (premise)

V Someone hoping that all evils are overcome once and for all would have to presuppose a transcendent power such as the existence of the theistic God. (from III and IV)

VI Naturalism precludes the existence of transcendent entities, and as such, the existence of the theistic God. (definition of naturalism)

VII According to naturalism, many evils will never be overcome. (from IV, V, VI)

VIII A world in which all evils are overcome (and, correspondingly, all good acts accredited) is a better world than one in which this is not the case.[4] (value judgement)

IX A world in which theism is true is better than one in which naturalism is true. (from VII and VIII)

X Someone who hopes that theism is true hopes for a better world than someone who hopes that naturalism is true (implication from IX)

XI Hoping for a better world is rational unless it can be shown that the object of this hope is impossible (or almost impossible). (premise)

XII It can be shown neither that theism is impossible (or almost impossible) nor that our best empirical and philosophical reasons speak in favour of naturalism. Rather, there are serious reasons speaking against the truth of naturalism (conclusion from the arguments in part I of the book)

3 Teten's argument is inspired by Kant's reflections on the connection between one's virtuous behaviour and ultimate happiness, and by Kant's famous question 'What may I hope?' (A806/B833). Tetens (2013a) makes an explicit reference to Kant.

4 The argument presupposes that "better" and "worse" is defined in terms of moral good and evil.

XIII If the truth of naturalism (and the falsity of theism) cannot be shown, then someone is rationally justified to hope that theism is true. (from XI and XII)

XIV If the hope in the truth of theism is a hope for a better world in comparison with the hope in the truth of naturalism, and someone is justified to hope in the truth of theism, then this hope should be preferred over the hope in the truth of naturalism. (from X and XIII)

CON It is rational to accept theism and this acceptance is to be rationally preferred over the acceptance of naturalism. (from XIII and XIV)

I consider now the single premises in turn:

Premise I is most likely true. There are strong reasons in favour of the view that in one way or another each human person suffers from evil on the one hand and acts in a morally deficient way or falls short of her full moral potential on the other hand. Even those who do not share as grim a view of our moral status as that of McCord Adams's account of horrendous evil[5] can hardly deny that evils of various kinds infest our existence. Murder, rape, violence, diseases, destructive exploitation of natural resources or the causing of psychic traumas that make meaningful human life impossible are just a few of the more obvious evils on the spectrum ubiquitous in our societies.

Premise II also appears unproblematic. There are no signs that we human beings in the near future will develop our morality and humanness to such an extent that we banish at least moral evils from this world. A short glimpse at current political, social, economic and environmental conditions suffices to dissipate any optimism that humanity as a whole is about to step into a new period of general sympathy, harmony, and prosperity.

If fundamental moral improvement is neither to be expected from individual human beings nor from national or international institutions, then it is hard to see which other this-worldly power could bring about an overall and lasting change for the good. Moreover, even if there were reliable signs of a general development toward the good, these signs would not undermine premise II. The reason is that many victims and perpetrators throughout human history would remain beyond the reach of any ultimate justice and compensation. From these premises it follows that only a transcendent power is able to overcome all evils once and for all, and to bring about ultimate justice. The theistic God is such a power. Premise IV refers to this theological fact, and premise V can be concluded from III and IV.

5 A brief account is found in McCord-Adams (2013), 162–165.

Premise VI points to one central tenet of a commonly accepted characterization of naturalism.[6]

Premise VII is a consequence of the previous premises, and naturalists should have no qualms accepting it.[7] According to naturalism, we should not be surprised that in a universe of blind natural forces some people are less lucky than others or that an overall atonement of evil is not to be expected.[8]

Premise VIII appears to be a reasonable value judgement that conforms to our basic moral intuitions. We should also accept premises IX and X, because these follow from the previous ones.

Since the premises XIII and XIV can be derived from the premises X, XI and XII, premises XI and XII are crucial for the argument. Assuming that premise XII is well-grounded by the arguments in the first part of the book, the central premise up for discussion is XI. Since it is presumably unclear what would make a view a reasonable object of hope, it is natural for many to have a hard time accepting this premise. Would the pure metaphysical possibility of a view (and a few arguments against the rival position) suffice for reasonable hope? Imagine the following scenario: The existence of Islandic trolls or Himalayan yetis is metaphysically possible, and maybe there are even some signs pointing in the direction of their existence. In addition, one might argue that a world involving these creatures is also morally preferable to a world without them because the former world would additionally involve fascinating living beings and contain a higher biodiversity. If Anna invests all her time, energy and money into finding these creatures, then we would hardly describe Anna's activities and way of life as reasonable (given that the existence of these creatures can be excluded in the light of our wide-ranging knowledge about reality). Suppose that we confront her with the question whether it is really a good idea to dedicate her life to discovering whether these creatures exist, and that she responds: 'I hope that these creatures exist. Since no one has proven thus far that trolls and yetis are metaphysically impossible, my hope is justified. So you should stop telling me that what I am doing is irrational!'

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6 For a full characterization of naturalism, including a statement about personal reasons for adopting naturalism, see Vollmer 2007.

7 Russell's "A Free Man's Worship" is a telling expression of naturalism's existential consequences. For Russell the tragedy is the most triumphant of all arts, because it openly recognizes the fate of our existence – our 'powerlessness before the blind hurry of the universe from vanity to vanity'.

8 See Dawkins (1995), 133: "In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice."

Most of us would find this answer bewildering. Most of us would regard pure metaphysical possibility as insufficiently robust to base one's hope upon. In the same vein we might say that hoping for a final eschatological transformation of the world by the theistic God should not be considered a reasonable attitude. Although this hope is understandable from a moral-existential perspective, and although a reasonable and morally upright person should also welcome such a final state[9], it must be abandoned because, in the light of all our available knowledge, it amounts rather to an expression of wishful thinking. What should we say about this claim? Is the eschatological transformation of reality an object of reasonable hope or merely an understandable but irrational wish?

III Hope and Wishful Thinking

In order to answer this question, I begin with an analysis of hope. One prominent account of hope is Philip Pettit's.[10] In a first step he proposes a view of hope as a specific belief-desire-pair: the belief that a certain state of affairs may or may not obtain, and the desire that it obtains. Thus, hope consists of a (cognitive) belief and a (conative) desire.[11]

Yet Pettit argues that this analysis is insufficient, because it captures only what he calls "superficial hope". In order to become "substantial hope", one important additional factor is required: the confidence that the desired state of affairs F has a high probability of obtaining, and thus, becomes also action-guiding. It is because of this confidence that hope "consists in acting as if the desired prospect is going to obtain or has a good chance of obtaining"[12]. Thanks to the factor of confidence, a person with substantial hope will continue to take heart and continue to pursue his aim instead of becoming demoralized by a low probability assignment[13] to the thing he is hoping for.

Pettit writes: "It is to embrace an assumption that gives you heart and life and energy. [...] The assumption will be there to ensure that you are not prey to vicissitudes of appearances and warrant, now waxing cheerful, now despondent,

9 I am excluding the view that it might be existentially rational for a very bad person to welcome naturalistic annihilation due to the fear of going to hell.

10 Pettit (2004).

11 Pettit (2004), 154.

12 Pettit (2004), 158.

13 Although Pettit does not specify the probability assignment, it seems clear from his discussion that it can be <0.5.

as the tides of evidence ebb and flow. It will give you a fixity of purpose and outlook amid the flux to which beliefs, in the nature of things, are subject."[14]

In other words, substantial hope amounts to what Pettit calls "a cognitive resolve"[15], that is, to have hope is to regulate one's mind and direct it in a positive and pragmatic way toward the object of one's hope – in spite of insecure and unstable circumstances which might tempt us to waver or despair. Hope is a cognitive stabilizer that enables a person to engage in activities that increase the probability that the state of affairs hoped for, which we may call F, will obtain, instead of giving in to the beliefs and counter-evidence that often tend to plague us.[16] One of Pettit's examples is a patient facing a life-threatening disease with a 10 % chance of survival. Her hope for survival guards the patient against the pessimistic beliefs which naturally arise in the light of such a prognosis and which might result in self-abandonment, depression, or even a neglect of her treatment. Because of her hope, the patient acts as if she had a good chance of survival: She sticks to her treatment regime and keeps her spirits up. She does everything in her reach to bring it about that the hoped-for state of affairs will obtain, thereby increasing the probability that she will belong to the 10 % of survivors.

Pettit's account appears to be directed primarily toward pragmatic rationality. The hoping person effectively shields herself from the unstable tide of evidence, instead confidently focusing on the positive outcome hoped for. This allows her to act in favour of the outcome, and keeps her from being discouraged by the objectively low probability of success.

Pragmatically speaking this strategy appears reasonable. However, we might worry, first, that this analysis does not do justice to the proper nature of hope; and second, that such a pragmatic account of hope ultimately turns into a form of self-deception.

The first worry[17]: If a patient faces a very bad diagnosis and hopes to survive, then, according to Pettit her hope makes her act as if the hoped-for outcome is almost certain to obtain. For Pettit, this positive outlook is a precondition which must be met if the person is to be able to act in a way that is conducive toward bringing about the hoped-for end at all. But if the patient is confident that her hoped-for state of affairs has a good chance of obtaining, then why should she

14 Pettit (2004, 158.

15 Pettit (2004), 159.

16 This conception of hope is influenced by Michael Bratman's concept of intention. According to Bratman, intentions differ from desires because of their functional role. An intention involves a commitment to future action for realizing the intended state of affairs, whereas a desire does not.

17 See Döring (2014) for this and other objections to Pettit's account.

follow medical advice and take part in assigned therapies at all? Wouldn't it be more likely that a patient once she hopes will behave nonchalantly because her confidence that the hoped-for end will obtain makes her believe that she is not in a very serious situation at all?

A proverb says that 'we should hope for the best but prepare for the worst'.[18] A patient following this maxim hopes for a positive outcome but strictly follows the treatment regime – even if it includes serious side-effects and impairments – because she is aware of the severity of her situation. She accepts the detrimental side effects of her treatment not because she is confident that the best outcome will come about, but because she hopes that the worst one can be avoided or at least postponed. Thus, the pragmatic strategy central to Pettit's concept of hope does not seem to capture this familiar behaviour of a person hoping for a particular state of affairs.

In addition, it is questionable whether hope, understood as cognitive resolve, could do justice to the proper meaning of religious hope. Consider Pascal's well-known wager. Since we are in an epistemically unclear situation regarding God's existence and have no epistemic means for settling it, Pascal proposes that it is more reasonable to believe in God than not. The reason is that if God exists the believer will receive an incommensurable reward and avoid an incommensurable tragedy (eternal bliss versus eternal damnation). One might object that Pascal's form of religious hope is reduced to a variable in a utility calculus and is therefore based upon the wrong motivation. We should hope in God because of our love for God and not because of instrumental reasoning. Pragmatically speaking, Pascal's approach is a form of cognitive resolve and the result is belief in God, but from a religious perspective such a strategy is questionable at least because it denigrates God to a means for achieving man's desired happiness. Although the person comes to believe in God, she believes for the wrong reasons.

The second worry: Does Pettit's form of hope amount to self-deception?

Apart from difficulties with practical rationality, Pettit's account is also problematic from the perspective of epistemic rationality. If hope involves a "make-believe" that the hoped-for outcome has a high probability of obtaining, then hope lands a person with a mistaken view of reality. The hopeful person believes that a certain state of affairs has a high chance of obtaining, although in the light of the evidence available this certainly is not the case. Moreover, such make-believe can lead to drastic negative consequences which are better to avoid. Consider again our patient. She hopes so strongly in her recovery that she is unwilling to accept signs of her deterioration. She excludes the possibility that

18 Döring (2014), 122, uses this proverb.

she should prepare herself to end her life well. She is unwilling to call her far-off relatives for what might be a final meeting. She does not initiate any clarifying conversation with her son, even after years of little contact and much misunderstandings. She organizes her life around a hope which, like a frail reed, would not survive exposure to increasing evidence that things might turn out different than she hopes. Such a patient's hope mutates into self-deception. The patient refuses to acknowledge the seriousness of her situation and takes refuge in an illusion.

IV Reasonable Hope

These reflections suggest that an account of hope that places too much emphasis on make-believe that things are otherwise than evidence suggests (and on the consequent actions) will struggle to explain the real behaviour of many people who hope for a particular state of affairs, on the one hand, and court the danger of self-deceiving, on the other.

Here is a proposal for adjustment. I think that an account like Pettit's is correct that hope is a cognitive stabilizer which allows a person to carry on, whereas a person without hope would be disheartened and break down. The problematic suggestion is the claim that hope goes hand in hand with the confidence that the hoped-for object will almost certainly come about, so that evidence speaking against this possibility may be dismissed rather easily.

I propose, instead, that hope involves positively a special focus of awareness towards the hoped-for state of affairs and, negatively, evidence speaking against the hoped-for outcome is rather located at the margins of the person's cognitive system. Imagine once more the patient who hopes to survive. Because of her hope she focuses primarily on the evidence supporting this hope – for instance, by reading reports of other patients in a similar situation whose outcome was positive. At the same time she does not study similar cases to hers whose outcome was negative. This behaviour does not automatically amount to self-deception concerning the severity of her condition, nor to bringing herself to believe that her chances of survival are higher than the evidence suggests. Rather, declining to focus on the evidentially low probability of survival allows her to focus on the desired outcome and thus, she is capable to continue to hope. This hope is not based on falsely optimistic beliefs; it is just that the possibility of dying remains at the margins of her attention rather than at its centre, and is therefore prevented from undermining her hope.

One might object that it is also self-deceptive to decline to focus on counter-evidence in order to keep up one's hope. It is the person's failure to do her epistemic duty that allows her to keep up hope.

Here is an answer to this objection: It goes without saying that every rational person hopes for a good outcome. The patient hopes to recover, because living is a good for her. The claim that this hope is only possible because she is not taking into consideration all of the available evidence seems to presuppose an excessively strong notion of epistemic rationality.[19] It is true that, in the light of all available evidence, she should expect death rather than life. But why assume that she is failing to take account of all the available evidence? Rather, she is just not focusing on it. She has epistemic reasons to do so because she is justified to assume that a good ending could be possible for here, for there are other patients who can testify that they had good outcomes themselves. The hoping person sees this possibility clearly and wholeheartedly. If, in addition, seeing this possibility provides the subject with further motivation to act in a way that promotes the hoped-for state, then such an attitude has its merits from the perspective of epistemic and practical rationality.

Irrationality would only creep in if seeing this possibility would at the same time exclude taking a possible – and, objectively speaking, more likely – alternative into consideration. Recall the patient who is unwilling to accept the possibility of not recovering from her serious disease. Only then does her hope mutate into self-deception.

'Hope for the best but prepare for the worst' is not a maxim asking for two incompatible states of mind, but a reminder that hope should not motivate us to abandon realism. The desire to see her relatives and to initiate a clarifying conversation with her son does not imply that the patient has lost her hope and believes that death is imminent. Rather, it indicates that hope does not cloud her view of her difficult situation.[20]

Recapitulating the main lines of the discussion, we obtain the following picture:

(a) Hope can be pragmatically reasonable while being epistemically unreasonable. Hope, construed as causing a person to believe that the probability of the desired outcome is high or almost certain, amounts to a form of epistemic self-deception if, objectively speaking, the evidence does not support such a belief at all.

(b) Hope can be pragmatically as well as epistemically reasonable. This seems to be the case if the hoping person focuses primarily on the possibility of the

19 Clifford's principle is famous in this context: "[...] it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." Clifford (1999).

20 In a concrete situation it may be difficult to assess when the focus on a possibility of a positive outcome should be replaced with a focus on an evidence-based probability leaning toward a negative outcome. On this issue as it arises in medical ethics, see for instance Ruddick (1999).

desired state of affairs, yet without losing sight of her overall circumstances. By being at the margins of her awareness, these circumstances do not undermine the primary focus of hope; rather, they simply guarantee that she does not become immune to evidence speaking against the hoped-for object.

V Reasonable Hope and Metaphysical Modality

So far the discussion centred on the question whether hope is ultimately self-deceptive. It has been pointed out that seeing something as possible – even if the probability of obtaining it is very low – does not necessarily amount to epistemic or practical irrationality. I discuss now the sense in which seeing something as possible is reasonable hope.

First of all, seeing something as possible does preclude seeing it as impossible or as necessary. I cannot reasonably hope to find a formula for calculating the surface of a round square. The notion of a round square is logically contradictory and such entities are thus metaphysically impossible. Similarly, I cannot reasonably hope that the past will change – say, that the German football team wins the legendary 1966 World-Cup final for this event is over and done and no one, not even an almighty being, can alter the past. Likewise, I cannot reasonably hope for what is metaphysically or conceptually necessary. If I know that my brother is a bachelor, then I cannot reasonably hope that he is not married. Of course, I might be unfamiliar with the term 'bachelor' and thus hope that my brother is not married; or I might not know that the World-Cup final in 1966 is definitely over and therefore hope that Germany might still win it. Due to the limited conceptual and epistemic resources of the person hoping, hope is not irrational in these cases. Nevertheless, the reflections so far suggest that our awareness of metaphysical possibility puts a constraint on our hope: If what we are aware is metaphysically impossible, then it cannot be an object of our reasonable hope.

If hope is directed towards the metaphysically possible, then the next question is whether anything within this realm can be an object of reasonable hope. Remember Anna, who is hoping to find trolls and yetis, and claiming that she is justified doing so because these creatures are metaphysically possible. It is certainly permissible to hope for a state of affairs that has a good chance of obtaining. Imagine a patient again: she hopes to recover, and she knows that more than 85 % of patients with her symptoms do recover. Given this high probability that the hoped-for possibility will obtain, her hope is undoubtedly legitimate.

Is it also permissible to hope for an outcome that has a very low chance of obtaining? Think of a patient who knows that her disease is lethal in 90 % of

cases. As we have discussed, it appears that hope is reasonable assuming that the person remains aware of her dire situation. There is a certain chance of survival, and her hope to be among the lucky ones can be deemed rational as long as she does not adopt the false belief that she will certainly be among the lucky 10 %. Even more extremely, one can also reasonably hope to win the lottery even though one's chances are negligible. Such a hope is not irrational – as long as the hopeful person does not use it to justify (for example) purchasing expensive goods on credit. This sort of false hope is what makes the behaviour of a gambler tragic and irrational. She is so confident that she is among the winners of the next round that she cannot stop gambling – and in so doing she neglects the fact that each round is a separate event without any causal links to the previous or subsequent games. These examples support the view that hope for a possible outcome can be rational as long as it is paired with a realistic view of one's situation, even in case the hoped-for object only has a very small chance of obtaining.

There is still one more extreme class of cases to consider: those in which the object of hope is naturally impossible but metaphysically possible. Generally, miracles are regarded as such cases.[21] It is not naturally possible for ordinary water to turn into wine, but such a change is no metaphysical impossibility. In contrast to a round square or a married bachelor, we have no conceptual difficulties in imagining such an event. All that we need is to expand our conceptual space beyond the empirically possible by allowing that a supernatural cause like God might interfere in the natural course of events.

Now, one might object that such a conceptual expansion – though logically possible – is not permissible given our knowledge about reality. The reason would be that there is little support for the existence of a supernatural being like God. This claim, however, is a matter of dispute, as Tetens's book aims to show. Tetens argues that a naturalistic understanding of reality, as expressed in the present objection, receives more warrant in our (academic) culture than it is due, and that a closer analysis of the naturalistic credo reveals that this view has grave problems on its own. At this point it seems sensible to suppose that the question whether a person's hope is reasonable or irrational is bound to her background beliefs. Given naturalistic background beliefs, the hope of a supernatural being intervening in our world amounts to mere wishful thinking for naturalism categorically excludes the existence of such a being. Yet given a theistic framework of beliefs, such a hope is reasonable because God plays a central role in it.

21 Mumford (2001), for instance, defines a miracle as a natural event with a supernatural cause that is logically possible.

In other words, the standards for reasonable hope appear to be context-sensitive[22] – at least as long as the hopeful person takes the hoped-for state of affairs to be metaphysically possible. Once we are certain that a given hoped-for object is metaphysically impossible, then no hope that this object obtains can be reasonable. Given metaphysical possibility, however, the wider background beliefs of the hopeful person influence the standards of reasonable hope. Returning to Anna's demand that other people should treat her as a rational person (with an admittedly unusual interest), we might say that this demand depends on her metaphysical, scientific and religious background beliefs. In the culture of the Vikings of the 13th century her hope can be regarded as reasonable. As far as we know, however, there is no empirical evidence whatsoever for trolls. Anna, who lives in a culture where no such assumption is made, would thus be well advised to listen to her friends, to study all of the available evidence, and to reflect carefully on whether her claims that trolls and yetis exist pass critical examination.

VI Worldviews and Rationality

I have proposed that reasonable hope is context-sensitive. In what follows I will elaborate on this proposal with the help of the concept of a worldview.[23] A worldview is a term I introduce to referring to the framework within which a person understands the world and interprets her existence and her individual experiences.[24] A person might take reality to be a teleologically structured whole or a mere random collection of particles; she might interpret certain situations as meaningful or as meaningless; or she might emphasize certain experiences and de-emphasize others. The beliefs making up a worldview operate at a global level, for they interpret and integrate a person's individual, domain-specific beliefs into a structured whole. Examples of such global beliefs might be: 'All human beings have the same value', 'Nothing that happens is meaningless', 'There is no afterlife', '"Do not kill" is the most important ethical imperative' or 'God is like a loving and caring parent.'

It is against the background of the worldview that a person attempts to order and integrate her specific experiences and her domain-specific beliefs into a more or less coherent belief system, thus providing meaning and orientation for her as

22 Chignell (2013), 202–203, makes this point but is inclined toward the view that empirical impossibilities fall in the category of wishes rather than of hopes.

23 A detailed discussion of the concept of worldview can be found in Löffler (2006), 151–176.

24 The following considerations are developed more fully in Gasser (2012).

cognizer, decider, and agent. A worldview thus has a fundamental life-orienting role. The imagery of a web of beliefs might help us grasp more precisely the way in which a worldview is structured: the more central a belief is, the more confident the person holding it is that this belief is true. As a consequence, the more central a belief is, the less inclined the person will be to reject or revise it if she discovers it to be inconsistent or in tension with her other less central beliefs.

Imagine the following discussion among two people, Thomas and Mary. The belief that God exists is central to Mary's worldview. She holds this belief with great confidence and she has also reasons for it. She admires modern science, but thinks that nothing which it teaches contradicts her religious belief. The centre of Thomas's worldview, by contrast, includes the belief that physical matter is all that there ultimately is. If Mary believes that God's ultimate plan for creation includes raising people from the dead, and Thomas questions this belief in the light of natural science, then Mary might realize that her belief is in contradiction to Thomas's conception of modern science. Presuming that Mary takes Thomas to be a reliable, well-informed and honest person, she might start to reflect more thoroughly upon her belief which has been unchallenged so far. It is likely in such a situation that Mary will not accept Thomas's arguments and give up her view. One reason is that these arguments are less central to her worldview than her religious belief, and another is that she has positive reasons of her own for her belief. Mary might find Thomas's arguments in favour of his view persuasive, if considered in themselves, but she might nevertheless maintain her religious belief on the grounds that her confidence in it outweighs her confidence in Thomas's scientific arguments. She might say: 'Thomas is most likely right, as long as we consider his claim from a scientific perspective negating the existence of God. Dead people do not come back to life on this view, because it excludes any form of divine intervention. I, however, am a theist, and given what I take myself to know about God, and given my personal belief in him, and given the beliefs of other epistemically reliable and trustworthy believers, I think that I have good reasons to believe that God exists and will raise us from the dead.'

The upshot of this discussion is that, depending on which beliefs are central to a person's worldview, that person will find other beliefs more or less reasonable. Mary is convinced of her position not primarily because the arguments in favour of God's existence are stronger than the arguments in favour of naturalism given her interlocutor's assumptions, but because her belief in God is central to her overall belief system. A person regards consistency with her most central beliefs as valid guiding principles for determining what is true or likely. Because a person's worldview determines what she takes to be good evidence, an argument which might strike person A as persuasive might lack any force for person B, whose worldview does not recognize the force of this argument. The confidence

which a person has in the central claims of her worldview is likely to outweigh her confidence in a specific claim that is in tension with these central claims. In not recognizing the force of an argument, a person can be reasonable because, given her worldview, she has reasons to assume that the counterclaim is most probably wrong.[25] The conclusion drawn from these reflections is that single claims and arguments will generally fail to convince a person if these claims do not cohere with the central beliefs of her worldview because they do not carry enough "argumentative weight" with them as long as the person's worldview is stable.

One might have the impression at this point that a worldview is merely an accumulation of subjective opinions which, together, are largely immune to any rational criticism. This is not the case, however, because worldviews themselves are subject to criteria of rational assessment. The first criterion is consistency: a worldview has to be free of contradiction. The second criterion is coherence: a worldview should be a unified and coordinated interpretative system, rather than a loose collection of independent subsystems. A third criterion is reference to experience: a worldview has to be able to interpret, evaluate, and incorporate a person's various experiences. Finally, a worldview has to consider all possibly relevant facts and not arbitrarily exclude information which might count as evidence against it.[26] This is not to say that someone's belief system ought to be perfect in this way; worldviews are too complex for this. Rather these criteria should be taken as epistemic imperatives to re-evaluate and, if possible, to re-adjust the part of one's worldview challenged.

Returning full-circle to where we began this discussion, we are now in a position to better understand the sense in which reasonable hope is context-sensitive. Can I reasonably hope that the dead will rise? Against the backdrop of a naturalistic worldview such a hope is unreasonable, for all what we know about the world is that such an event is empirically impossible. I might desire this to be the case on the grounds that the rational constraints on desires appear less strict than those on hopes,[27] but I cannot reasonably hope that this is the case if this event is excluded from my empirically-oriented worldview as a matter of principle. Against the backdrop of a theistic worldview, by contrast, such a hope is reasonable, since I do believe that a loving God who cares for his creatures exists; because of this, the standards of the genuine possible are wider and more flexible than they are given naturalism.

25 See Faust (2008) on this issue.

26 These criteria are to be found in Ferré (1961), 161–162.

27 Wheatley (1958), for instance, analyzes wishing in terms of believing what is logically possible and analyzes hoping in terms of believing what is physically possible.

VII Tying the Threads Together

In the light of this discussion, it should be clear that Tetens's reflections are embedded within the larger context of a dialogue among different worldviews.[28] I agree with Tetens that the hope that the world will ultimately and finally turn toward the good is a strength of a theistic understanding of reality. As the reflections upon hope indicate, I also agree with Tetens that the hope for a good end need not be wishful or otherwise irrational thinking.[29] As long as naturalism faces serious theoretical and practical challenges, it is not the only game in town. Theism presents a viable alternative understanding of reality.[30]

Tetens thinks that, from this dialectical standpoint, theism enjoys an advantage. If theism provides a more preferable ultimate outlook than naturalism, and if both views stand in a kind of argumentative stalemate, then in the light of our uncertain epistemic situation we should opt for theism. Theism provides more resources to respond to our deep existential and moral needs, needs which are oriented towards the good and justice of all.[31]

Tetens argues that not even the problem of evil tips the scales in favour of naturalism, because neither naturalism nor theism has a convincing solution for it.[32] It is here where I depart from Tetens's line of reasoning. In my eyes the

28 Tetens (2013b) explicitly refers to naturalism as a scientificalist-technological worldview which dominates contemporary western culture.

29 Tetens (2015), 77–78. He writes: "Nur der Theist vermag in der Hoffnung zu leben, dass die Welt gut wird, ohne dass er die Übel und Leiden in der Welt mit Resignation, tragischer Auflehnung, zynischem egoistischen Hedonismus oder illusionärem Selbsterlösungswahn quittieren muss. [...] Warum nehmen das nur wenige als das wahr, was es wirklich ist: nämlich als eine wirkliche Stärke des Theismus? Weil viele glauben, der Theismus besäße diese Stärke nur um den Preis bloßen Wunschdenkens."

30 Döring (2014), 128–129, refers to this point (although one might wonder whether the impossibility of knowing whether God exists or not is already sufficient for rational belief in God).: "[...] we cannot know that God exists; but conversely we cannot know that God does not exist. Therefore, the possibility of his existence and recurrence cannot rationally be excluded, and thus, if I believe in God, it is not irrational to hope."

31 McCord-Adams's (2013) pursues a structurally similar argument. She claims that many people organize their lives in terms of purpose-driven optimism. Such an attitude towards life, however, so her argument goes, cannot be coherently maintained if one is a realist and takes into consideration all the evils in our world, and is an agnostic or an atheist. Theism, in contrast, fares much better in allowing both for realism about the evils in the world and for an optimistic prospect for human life, because of God, to be fundamentally meaningful.

32 Tetens (2015), 79: "Der Theodizee-Einwand, der sich nicht aus der Welt schaffen lässt, verschiebt die Gewichte nicht zugunsten des Naturalismus. Der Naturalist hat nichts Substanzielleres zur Erklärung der Übel in der Welt zu sagen, geschweige denn zu ihrer Rechtfertigung."

problem of evil poses a particular problem for theism but not for naturalism. Here is why: If the naturalistic account is correct, then we are nothing but the random product of a vast interplay of blind natural forces. On this view, there is no plan or teleological structure underlying the evolution of the cosmos. But if this is so, then it serves as an answer to the problem of evil though admittedly not a satisfying one. As Dawkins has put it, in a universe of blind physical forces it should not come as a surprise that some people experience lives of misery and suffering. Their lives are just the result of a random process. Posing further questions about the whys and wherefores of these processes misses the point: any further questioning is senseless because the cosmos simply has no deeper rational structure.

For the theist, by contrast, the problem has an altogether different structure. If the God as conceived of by classical theism exists, then the cosmos is at its most fundamental level personal and rational. A deeper reason behind the suffering we experience should thus be expected. It is legitimate to think that God has a reasonable answer to the whys and wherefores of suffering. And herein lies what we might call the deep problem of theodicy: Even if we accept one of the many responses to the problem of evil[33], or a combination of such responses, we are left with the stark impression that God's preventing at least some evils would neither diminish nor destroy any of the goals he might aim to achieve in creation. Even if we grant that a world of creatures with free will earlier or later leads to both natural and moral evils, this concession does not explain why God would be justified in permitting so much horrific evil rather than less. Optimistically, a theodicy might be able to explain why there is evil rather than not – but I see no approach which can explain why there is the vast amount and horrific intensity of evil which there in fact is.[34]

The theist must at least provide a provisional answer to the deep problem of evil; the naturalist, instead, can refer to nature's blind forces. This is an answer – as unsatisfying as it might appear – but from the theist we expect a fuller and more comprehensive answer because according to theism the world is rationally structured and subject to a moral evaluation. The impression that the theist cannot give a satisfying answer puts him in a serious dialectical predicament. This is not to say that the theist should abandon his belief and convert to naturalism. As the brief analysis of worldviews has shown, for a believer other

33 Think, for instance, of a punishment-theodicy, free will-theodicy, natural law-theodicy or greater good-theodicy.

34 These thoughts are congenial with Howard-Snyder (2008), 340.

factors may speak in favour of theism, factors which to a certain extent absorb the force of the problem of evil.[35]

Thus, hoping for God's redemption is an object of reasonable hope, for sure from a pragmatic perspective, and I have pointed at some reasons to think that the same holds from the epistemic perspective too. However, epistemically speaking, this hope might be weaker than Tetens seems to suggest. The problem of evil is one major reason for why this is so.

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35 For instance, one might think of a deep personal encounter with the divine as, for instance, happened to Job or to Mother Teresa. Although such an experience would not annul one's personal suffering or one's awareness of all the evil in the world, it can provide epistemic and existential resources for the strong believe that the evil does not have the final say and that the world is totally secure in God.

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