

Axiarchism: How to Narrow the Gap Between Pro-Theism and Anti-Theism

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Abstract: (Wide) pro-theism is the view that the world is better overall if theism is true. (Wide) anti-theism is the view that our world would be better overall if atheism is true. Arguments for pro-theism and anti-theism typically make use of traditional theism (the view that an omni-God exists) and generic atheism (the view that an omni-God doesn't exist). In my view, when the debate between pro-theists and anti-theists makes use of traditional theism and generic atheism, pro-theism clearly comes out on top. In this paper, I consider whether this result (i.e. pro-theism's advantage over anti-theism) changes if we bring axiarchism into the mix: I compare axiarchistic theism and axiarchistic atheism. General axiarchism is the view that the world exists *because* it is good that it exists, and extreme axiarchism is the view that the world exists *because* it is the best possible world. When we take general axiarchistic theism and general axiarchistic atheism as our worldviews for comparison, I argue that there is no significant change with respect to anti-theism and pro-theism: neither position is able to capture goods that are traditionally associated with the other position, and so pro-theism still wins out. However, if we instead compare *extreme* axiarchistic atheism with *extreme* axiarchistic theism there is a significant change: while the case for pro-theism remains the same (because, I argue, it is not able to capture any of the goods of anti-theism), the case for anti-theism is greatly strengthened, because it is able to capture nearly all of the goods of pro-theism (e.g. the good of an afterlife, of cosmic justice, of there being no gratuitous evil). In other words, given extreme axiarchism, atheistic worlds can (and will) house goods that are traditionally associated with theistic worlds (e.g. those listed prior). This means that, given extreme axiarchism, pro-theists can't appeal to those goods as favoring their position: they obtain whether our world is atheistic or theistic. Thus, they don't favor pro-theism over anti-theism; the case for anti-theism has been strengthened. (Alternatively, we may say that the case for pro-theism has been weakened.) Ultimately, there is one good that extreme axiarchistic atheism does not enable anti-theism to capture—namely, God's intrinsic unlimited goodness—and I argue that this shows that there is still a gap between pro-theism and anti-theism; while the gap has been substantially narrowed, it has not been eliminated. Thus, I suggest that the best route forward for anti-theists is to cast doubt on the view that God's intrinsic goodness is unlimited.

1. Introduction

When considering different worldviews there are (at least) three questions that can be asked: the existential question (is this worldview *true*?), the epistemological question (is this worldview *rational*?), and the axiological question (would this worldview, if true, be *better* than other worldviews?). It is the latter-most question that is the subject of this chapter. Typically, when the axiological question is considered, the worldviews that are being compared are traditional theism and generic atheism. But traditional theism and generic atheism are not exhaustive of worldviews; there are many other worldviews that we can compare in terms of axiology (e.g. pantheism, panentheism, and polytheism). Moreover, there are numerous variations of both theism and atheism, and one's axiological conclusions will be influenced by what variation is under consideration. In this chapter, I will consider a particular variation of atheism and theism to see what (if any) effect it has on the dispute between pro-theists and anti-theists. The variation I'm interested in is an *axiarchistic* variation. While I do not adhere to axiarchism (or anti-theism), it's an avenue worth considering—it is worth considering the best case for anti-theism that can be made. Below, I will briefly explain different types of axiarchism, atheism, and theism. After this, I will briefly outline some goods that have been used to argue in favor of pro-theism and anti-theism. I will argue that while these goods do indeed count in favor of (traditional) pro-theism and against (generic) anti-theism, that extreme axiarchistic atheism—a variant of atheism—enables anti-theism to close the gap significantly (although not completely) with pro-theism.

2. Axiarchism, Theism, and Atheism

Theism, let's say, is the view that God—an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good being—exists. Atheism, let's say, is the denial of this: if atheism is true, then no omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good being exists. Note that on this view, atheism is compatible with various supernatural phenomena: a very powerful (though not omnipotent), very knowledgeable (though not omniscient), and very good (but not perfectly good) being may have created our world, given atheism.¹ Additionally, there may be such things as ghosts, angels, and demons given this generic form of atheism. An alternative to atheism that is stronger than it is naturalism, which we may take to be the view that (roughly) God, or anything at all like him, does not exist.² Whereas atheism says just that God doesn't exist, naturalism says more: it says that God *or anything at all like him* (e.g. ghosts, spirits, etc.) doesn't exist; naturalism says more about reality than atheism. Naturalism will not be under consideration here, but it is nevertheless useful to contrast it with atheism to illustrate the specific—and relatively weak—nature of atheism.

Theism and atheism are simple and familiar enough that they require little by way of explanation. Axiarchism, however, requires more by way of explanation: it is far more obscure

¹ More specifically, so long as one of these properties is lacking, it's compatible with atheism. If, for example, an omniscient, omnipotent, and very good (but not perfectly good) being created the world, atheism holds true.

² I borrow this characterization from Alvin Plantinga (2011).

and rarely discussed. What is axiarchism? Those who endorse axiarchism hold that the world's existence has an *ethical* explanation: the universe exists because it would be good that it did.³ While all axiarchists are committed to the universe having an ethical explanation, the exact content of axiarchism varies. For example, at the most general level axiarchism—call it generic axiarchism—says that the world exists *because it is good that it exists*. As John Leslie says, “the world’s existence and detailed nature are products of a directly active ethical necessity.” (1970: 286)⁴ However, another version of axiarchism—call it extreme axiarchism—holds that our world exists *because it is the best possible world* and it is good that *that* world—the best possible world—exists. So, a world in which extreme axiarchism holds is *the best possible world*. Most of my discussion will be focused on extreme axiarchism, however, I will briefly discuss generic axiarchism and its effect on the axiology of theism.⁵

What should be clear is that while theism and atheism are mutually exclusive, theism and axiarchism—in both its general and extreme form—are *compatible*, as is atheism and axiarchism (again, in both its general and extreme form).⁶ As such, I will later consider how conjoining axiarchism with theism and atheism changes matters when considering the axiology of theism.

3. Traditional Reasons for Pro-Theism and Anti-Theism

When considering the axiological status of a worldview, there are different questions that can be asked. In this chapter, I will consider four different positions in the axiology of theism:⁷ (a) personal pro-theism: the view that it would be better *for at least some persons* if God exists; (b) personal anti-theism: the view that it would be worse *for at least some persons* if God exists; (c) wide pro-theism: the view that it would be better overall if God exists; and (d) wide anti-theism: the view that it would be worse overall if God exists.⁸ (Unless stated otherwise, I will use “anti-theism” to mean wide anti-theism, and “pro-theism” to mean wide pro-theism.) Below, I will briefly explain several reasons in favor of (a), (b), (c), and (d). In the next section, I will consider how general and extreme axiarchism changes things.

3.1 Anti-Theism

³ For different statements and discussions of axiarchism, see John Leslie (1970), Tim Mulgan (2017), Derek Parfit (1998), and Ted Poston (2020).

⁴ Leslie (1970) notes that this may result in a multiverse, since “if ethical needs can produce one world, they would presumably produce any number of similar worlds.” (1970: 298)

⁵ This leaves axiarchism open to objections from the quality of our world: some might argue it is false because our world is (supposedly) clearly not the best.

⁶ More accurately, the type of axiarchism I’m considering is compatible with theism. While characterizations of axiarchism are typically compatible with theism, Poston’s (2020) is not. He characterizes axiarchism as follows: “[a]xiarchism is the view that there is fundamentally an impersonal normative creative force that explains the universe’s existence.” (2020: 411) His version of axiarchism I will set aside for this paper.

⁷ It is important to note that these are just the *main* positions. Klaas Kraay and Chris Dragos (2013) document numerous positions one can take in respect to the axiology of theism.

⁸ For an overview of the axiology of theism, see Loughheed (2019)

In this section, I will briefly explain some reasons that have been given to favor personal anti-theism. However—as I explain below—the reasons to endorse personal anti-theism examined here are also reasons to endorse wide anti-theism: that the world would be worse for some persons if God exists is, other things held equal, reason to think that the world would be worse *overall* if God exists.

3.1.1 A Meaningful Life

God's existence, some argue, precludes some persons from having a meaningful life. This is because God's existence (it's argued) *precludes* goods that are necessary for some persons to have a meaningful life, and so it is better *for those persons* if God does not exist. Guy Kahane states the argument as follows:

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—reasonably treat God's existence as undesirable without having to think of it as impersonally bad or as merely setting back too many of my interests. The thought is that in a world where complete privacy is impossible, where one is subordinate to a superior being, certain kinds of life plans, aspirations, and projects cannot make sense ... Theists sometimes claim that if God does not exist, life has no meaning. I am now suggesting that if God does exist, the life of at least some would lose its meaning. (2011: 691-692)⁹

The idea here is clear enough: God's existence rules out certain things (such as independence) that are necessary for some to have a meaningful life. And this counts in favor of *personal anti-theism*. Of course, Kahane's claim can be challenged at different points. For example, one might doubt whether there are actually any persons whose life's meaning depends on God's non-existence. However, we need not delve into this issue here. Instead, let's grant—for the sake of argument—its truth: God's existence precludes certain goods that are necessary for some persons to have a meaningful life, and so it would be better for those persons if God does not exist. So, we have some reason to endorse personal anti-theism. But this also seems to support wide anti-theism: when one's life lacks meaning, other things held equal, it makes the world as a whole less valuable. Therefore, insofar as God's existence entails the meaninglessness of some lives, the world is—other things held equal—worse on account of God's existence.¹⁰ And so this counts in favor of wide anti-theism.

⁹ See Penner (2015) for an initial objection to this argument, Lougheed (2017) for a reformulation and defense of it, and Penner (2018) for an objection to Lougheed's reformulation.

¹⁰ Perhaps in our world there are m number of persons whose lives would have meaning on account of his existence and there are n number of persons whose lives would have meaning on account of his non-existence, and $m > n$. My use of "other things held equal" is supposed to circumvent this issue. In any case, even if God's existence is a net positive in terms of meaningful lives because $m > n$, this won't affect my argument below. (Indeed, I think it's almost certainly true that $m > n$.)

3.1.2 The Good of Privacy

Another good that is said to obtain in atheistic worlds (but not theistic worlds) is the good of *privacy*. Kirk Lougheed puts explains the issue this way:

If God exists, then the good of privacy cannot exist. Since God is all-knowing, God knows the inner mental content of every human. Necessarily, then, an individual cannot have complete privacy if God exists. (Lougheed 2018a: 687)

The idea is straightforward: God's omniscience involves knowing all his creatures' mental content, and this precludes privacy on the part of his creatures. Furthermore, it does not matter whether God uses his knowledge of our inner lives for good purposes: it is the lack of privacy itself that is bad. For example, if a child's parents read her diary for a good reason (e.g. to see how they could help her flourish) it is nevertheless bad that they violate her privacy. (Lougheed 2018a: 687) Thus, God's existence makes the world worse for those whose privacy is violated by him, and so we have some reason to endorse personal anti-theism. However—like with the meaningful life argument—this argument also seems to support wide anti-theism. This is because a privacy violation is not only bad for the person whose privacy is violated: it is also bad (at least to a degree) for the world—worlds without privacy violations are, other things held equal, better than worlds with privacy violations. And so this gives us at least some reason to endorse wide anti-theism.

3.1.3 Autonomy

Another (purported) good that obtains (at least *possibly*) in atheistic worlds is the good of autonomy. Theistic worlds rule out autonomy because God (presumably) created the universe with a plan in mind, and we (humans) must act in accord with it—or, supposing it is possible to reject our role, it will doubtless be costly. Guy Kahane states the issue as follows:

If God created the universe, and us within it, He presumably did that for a purpose. If there is such a cosmic plan, and we (and others) are here to play our part in it, this severely constrains our ability to lead our lives according to our own plan. Even if it is permissible for us to just reject our role in God's plan (which is far from obvious), that rejection would surely have a cost...To reject one's role in the divine plan isn't the same as being entirely free from the pressures of such a plan. (2018: 110-111)

So, basically, either we lose our autonomy to live how we see fit, or we can deviate from God's plan at a cost; either our autonomy is constrained or we lose value elsewhere. Moreover, that deviating from God's plan would be costly means that we are (in some sense) *coerced* into keeping with his plan, which reduces our autonomy as well. Or so

Kahane argues. And this means that our world is worse *for us* if God exists; it supports personal anti-theism. However, this also supports wide anti-theism. This is because a world without autonomy violations is, other things held equal, better than a world with autonomy violations. And this means that our world is, other things held equal, worse if it is theistic, and so we have at least some reason to endorse wide anti-theism.

In this section, I've outlined three reasons that are used to motivate personal anti-theism: the meaningful life argument, and the goods of privacy and autonomy. While these are typically used to support personal anti-theism, I have argued that they also provide at least some support for wide anti-theism.

3.2. Pro-Theism

Above, I outlined some reasons to favor anti-theism over pro-theism. In this section, I will outline different reasons that have been given to favor pro-theism over anti-theism.

3.2.1 God's Goodness

One clear source of value that obtains in theistic worlds (but not atheistic ones) is the existence of God himself. This is a great good since, in Alvin Plantinga's words, God is unlimited in value. He says:

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)

Similarly, Kraay and Dragos say that

Many would urge that the presence in a world of an unsurpassable being [i.e. God] itself adds enough value to the world to establish...impersonal pro-theism. (2013: 168)

The idea here is this: a theistic world is one that contains a being of unlimited (Plantinga) or unsurpassable (Kraay and Dragos) value—namely God—and this means that our world is more valuable if it is a theistic world than if it is an atheistic world: the former entails that our world contains a being of unlimited or at least unsurpassable value but the latter does not.¹¹ Another way to understand what Plantinga and Kraay and Dragos are getting at is that there's no way to *increase* God's value; it's *maximal*—if it's maximal, that means it cannot be surpassed and is not limited in any way.

¹¹ If right, then we have grounds to endorse what Guy Kahane (2018) calls *superior world pro-theism*: the view that *any* world in which God exists is better than all worlds in which he does not exist.

Of course, there are objections that can be raised to this view. For example, theists typically ascribe God the property of perfect goodness, or perhaps absolute perfection. However, it is not clear that either of these properties entails *unlimited* goodness. Perhaps these properties entail unsurpassable goodness (like Kraay and Dragos suggest), but unsurpassable allows the possibility of an atheist world having an equal value. Additionally, Mark Murphy (2017) contends that an absolutely perfect being—God—need not be morally perfect, which might alter how one evaluates the value of God’s goodness. But let’s set these issues aside and grant, for the sake of argument, that a theistic world will contain God and so will be unlimited in value. And so we have reason to favor pro-theism.

3.2.2 Afterlife

Another good that obtains in theistic worlds is the good of an afterlife.¹² The afterlife is a time in which all creatures that had existed will come into existence again. Of course, what this next existence looks like is not agreed on. It may, for example, be a positive afterlife for all individuals (universalism). Alternatively, perhaps it will be positive for some and negative for others (traditionalism). Or perhaps it will involve a positive afterlife for some individuals and no afterlife at all for others (annihilationism). I will not speculate on this issue. Instead, I will—for the sake of simplicity—assume that the afterlife will be *good* for all persons, where *good* does not entail *positive*. (For example, it is *good* that a dangerous criminal be separated from society, but it might not be a positive experience for that person.) And this, of course, counts in favor of pro-theism: it is better that our world contains an afterlife.

3.2.3 Cosmic Justice

Another good that obtains in theistic worlds is cosmic justice. God, being omnipotent, omniscient, and all good will ensure that justice is achieved: though some may seem to live enjoyable lives while being horribly evil, things will be made right in the end by God; everyone will receive what he or she is due in the end (Lougheed 2018b). This counts in favor of theist worlds: our world is better if there is ultimate cosmic justice; it’s better if God exists.

3.2.4 No Gratuitous Evil

Finally, a good that obtains in theistic worlds is the lack of gratuitous evil. Gratuitous evil is evil for which there is no morally justifying reason.¹³ Typically, it is thought that if a good *G* justifies an evil *E*, then *E* was necessary for *G* and *G* at least outweighs *E*. For example, Michael Bergmann says that “a good state of affairs *G*—which might just be the prevention of some bad state of affairs *E**—counts as a God-justifying reason for permitting an evil *E* if and only if (i) *G*’s goodness outweighs *E*’s badness and (ii) *G* couldn’t be obtained without permitting *E* or something as bad or worse.” (2012: 11, footnote 5) Similarly, Kraay and Dragos say

¹² This good is discussed in Perry Hendricks and Kirk Lougheed (2019).

¹³ I oversimplify here. See Klaas Kraay (2016a and 2016b) for a discussion of different views on gratuitous evil.

[O]n theism, any evil that occurs is permitted either for the sake of obtaining a *sufficiently significant, otherwise-unobtainable* good, or for the sake of *preventing a sufficiently significant, otherwise-unpreventable* evil. (2013: 166)

And if there is no such good, then the evil is *gratuitous*. In other words, if an evil is not connected to a greater good, then it is gratuitous evil. Thus, a world in which there is gratuitous evil is a world in which the world could have been improved by eliminating (at least) some evil. Alternatively, a world in which there is no gratuitous evil is a world in which the elimination of any evil would reduce the value of the world—make it worse. Put differently, a world without gratuitous evil is a world in which all instances of evil are (at least) outweighed by goods that required them in order to obtain. This means that no one has suffered in vain; all evil has been for the best. (Of course, there is some dispute about whether God can allow gratuitous evil: some philosophers have argued that theism does not entail that there is no gratuitous evil.¹⁴ However, for our purposes here, it will be assumed that theistic worlds do not have gratuitous evil.) This means that all of the evil that has occurred in our world was necessary for a greater good—for example the Holocaust was necessary for a greater good, and eliminating the Holocaust would have made our world *worse*.

Notice that it follows *definitionally* that it would be better if our world does not have any gratuitous evil. This is because if there is gratuitous evil, then there is (at least) some evil that is not connected to a greater good. This can be easily illustrated by comparing two actions. To recycle an above example, suppose that in world W_1 the Holocaust is a case of gratuitous evil: there is no greater good connected to it. Alternatively, suppose that in world W_2 , there *is* a greater good connected to the Holocaust—it is not a case of gratuitous evil. Now, suppose that W_1 and W_2 are exactly alike except for the fact that the Holocaust is not connected to a greater good in W_1 and it is connected to a greater good in W_2 . Clearly, W_2 is *better* than W_1 . And this will hold true when we apply this to *all* instances of evil: a world W_3 in which every evil is connected to a greater good is going to be more valuable than a world W_4 that is just like W_3 *except* there are some evils that are not connected to greater goods. So, per our assumption, a world in which God exists is a world without gratuitous evil, this strongly counts in favor of wide pro-theism.

In this section, I have outlined some reasons in favor of pro-theism and some reasons in favor of anti-theism. In the next section, I will consider how axiarchism, in both its general and extreme form, changes the debate between pro-theism and anti-theism.

4. How Axiarchism Changes things

Above, I've (non-exhaustively) outlined different reasons in favor of anti-theism and pro-theism. Anti-theists claim privacy, autonomy, and meaningful lives in their favor, while

¹⁴ While most philosophers seem to think God's existence is incompatible with gratuitous evil, this view has been challenged in different ways by William Hasker (2008), Justin Mooney (2019), and Peter van Inwagen (2006).

pro-theists claim God's unlimited value, the afterlife, cosmic justice, and the lack of gratuitous evil in their favor. It seems clear that when these goods are weighed against each other, pro-theism comes out on top—the goods that accompany God's existence outweigh the goods that come from his non-existence. However, if we consider axiarchistic variants of theism and atheism, this analysis may change: it may enable one side to *capture* the goods (or, at least, some of the goods) of the other side, thereby improving that side's prospects. Below, I will consider this issue, arguing ultimately that axiarchism improves the prospects of anti-theism.

4.1 Generic Axiarchistic Theism and Atheism

Recall that generic axiarchism states merely that the world exists because it is good that it exists. As noted above this means that generic axiarchism is compatible with theism: if the reason that God creates the world is *because* it (the world) is good, then generic axiarchistic theism is true. Similarly, generic axiarchism is compatible with atheism: if God does not exist and yet the world exists *because* it is good that it exists, then generic axiarchistic atheism is true.

Generic axiarchism does not change much with respect to the axiology of theism—or, at least, it does not help anti-theists close the gap with pro-theists and it does not help pro-theists expand the gap with anti-theists. This is because conjoining generic axiarchism to theism does not add anything that theism does not already have: the goods traditionally accompany theism (e.g. no gratuitous evil, justice, etc.) already seem to ensure that the world is good. So, conjoining generic axiarchism with theism does not do much (if anything). The same, however, goes for adding generic axiarchism to atheism. This is for several reasons. First, if our world is the one under consideration, it is plausible that our world is good overall, in the sense that there is *at least* more good than bad. But then our world will be good whether or not generic axiarchism holds. So, if an atheist adopts generic axiarchism, it does not provide any more reason to favor anti-theism. (Of course, this is a point that could be disputed—some might argue that our world is bad or neutral overall. I will not consider this issue here.) Moreover, generic axiarchistic atheism does not (at least obviously) capture any of the goods of pro-theism: it does not, for example, show that our world contains no gratuitous evil or an afterlife; that our world is *good* does not entail that there is no gratuitous evil or that there is an afterlife (etc.). And so the gap between pro-theism and anti-theism is not (at least significantly) narrowed by conjoining generic axiarchism with atheism. In light of this, I will not consider generic axiarchism further. Instead, I will consider extreme axiarchism and its effect on the pro-theism anti-theism debate.

4.2 Extreme axiarchism

We saw above that adding generic axiarchism to theism and atheism does not do much; it does not improve the case for pro-theism and it does not significantly (if at all) improve the case for anti-theism. However, *extreme* axiarchism may change things. In this section, I will consider its effects, arguing that it *significantly* narrows the gap between pro-theism and anti-theism: it

allows anti-theism to capture many of the goods of pro-theism while leaving the case for pro-theism unimproved.

Recall that given extreme axiarchism, that the world exists *because* it is the best possible world. Like generic axiarchism, extreme axiarchism is compatible both with theism and atheism: an atheist may hold that the world exists *because* it is the best possible world, and a theist may hold that God created the world *because* it is the best possible world. There is some controversy about whether there is a best possible world. For example, Alvin Plantinga (1974) argues that there is no single best possible world—instead, he thinks, there is a *set* of best possible worlds. Additionally, there is controversy about, supposing that there is a best possible world, whether God must create it. Robert Adams (1972) argues that God, at least according to the Christian conception, need not create the best possible world. I will not enter into either of these controversies here, aside from noting that I think both Plantinga and Adams are correct. Instead, I will assume that there is a best possible world *and* that God must create it—his perfection demands it. In this section, I will consider whether extreme axiarchism changes the debate between pro-theists and anti-theists, ultimately arguing that it significantly narrows the gap between pro-theism and anti-theism: it brings atheistic worlds closer, in terms of value, to theistic worlds.

4.2.1 Extreme Axiarchistic Theism

Extreme axiarchistic theism is the view that God exists and that he created the world *because* it is the best possible world. Does this improve the case for pro-theism? If it does, it is not clear how it does. This is because we've already assumed that God *must* create the best possible world. And so extreme axiarchistic theism appears redundant. Perhaps it changes the *explanation* for the world's existence—perhaps on non-extreme axiarchistic traditional theism, God creates *because* he desired to (etc.) whereas on extreme axiarchistic theism God creates the world *because* it is the best possible world. But that does not change anything in terms of axiology. Moreover, it does not enable pro-theism to capture any anti-theistic goods: it doesn't enable the pro-theist to get privacy, autonomy, or show that no one loses their life's meaning. This is because those goods are *incompatible* with God's existence:¹⁵ since God is omniscient, he will know everything about his creatures' mental lives, and so the good of privacy cannot be captured. Since God is the omnipotent creator, autonomy cannot be captured. And finally, those who defend the meaningful life argument (see Section 3.1.1 above) hold that God's *existence* renders the lives of some unmeaningful, making the good associated with the meaningful life argument immune to capture. And so none of the anti-theistic goods—or, at least, none that have been discussed here—can be captured by adding extreme axiarchism to theism. Thus, extreme axiarchistic theism does not improve the case for pro-theism; it leaves it untouched.

4.2.2 Extreme Axiarchistic Atheism

¹⁵ Or, at least, proponents of anti-theism have argued that they are incompatible with God's existence.

While extreme axiarchism adds nothing to *pro-theism*, I will argue in this section that it greatly improves the prospects of *anti-theism*. This is because it enables anti-theism to capture almost all of the goods of pro-theism. Below, I will briefly consider the pro-theistic goods discussed above, and explain how, given extreme axiarchistic atheism, anti-theism captures nearly all of them.

4.2.2.1 Atheistic Afterlife

Theism, at least traditionally, entails that there is an afterlife, and this counts in favor of pro-theism—at least when we are comparing traditional theism with generic atheism. However, it is possible for there to be an atheistic world with an afterlife: a very powerful (but not omnipotent), very knowledgeable (but not omniscient), and very good (but not perfectly good) being could orchestrate an afterlife. Moreover, it's possible that some advanced non-god-like creatures could produce some sort of afterlife. Additionally, it is possible that an afterlife comes about by chance. However, if this is the case *and* an afterlife is a good that counts in favor of pro-theism, then the afterlife is going to be in the best of all possible worlds. (If an afterlife is not part of the best possible world, then God would not orchestrate it since, per our assumption, God must create the best possible world.) However, this means if our world is one in which extreme axiarchistic atheism holds, then there will be an afterlife. And this means that, given extreme axiarchistic atheism, anti-theism is able to capture the good of an afterlife from pro-theism—an afterlife no longer counts in favor of pro-theism.

4.2.2.2 Atheistic Cosmic Justice

That there will be cosmic justice counts in favor of pro-theism—at least when we are comparing traditional theism with generic atheism. However, this good can also be captured by extreme axiarchistic atheism. This is because cosmic justice is compatible with atheism: again, a very powerful (but not omnipotent), very knowledgeable (but not omniscient), and very good (but not perfectly good) being could orchestrate cosmic justice. An atheistic system of Karma would also do the trick: as Kahane points out, “[t]he Karmic cycle is one mechanism of cosmic justice that could easily also operate in a godless world.” (2018: 102). And so if the best of all possible worlds contains cosmic justice (which, again, it will if it counts in favor of pro-theism), extreme axiarchistic atheism will include cosmic justice. And this means that extreme axiarchistic atheism enables anti-theism to capture another good of pro-theism; cosmic justice no longer counts in favor of pro-theism.

4.2.2.3 Atheistic Lack of Gratuitous Evil

One of the biggest points in favor of pro-theism is that it entails that there is no gratuitous evil—all evil is (at least) attached to an outweighing good.¹⁶ (Again, at least this is the case when traditional theism is being compared to generic atheism.) This *strongly* counts in favor of pro-theism. However, this pro-theistic consideration can also be captured by anti-theism if the type of atheism under consideration is extreme axiarchistic atheism. This is because the best

¹⁶ Again, this is contentious. See above, footnote 13.

possible world will be one in which there is no gratuitous evil—again, this must be the case if it counts in favor of pro-theism. However, it's clearly possible that such a world obtains in the absence of God's existence; it's possible that all evils are connected to outweighing goods even if God does not exist. For example, perhaps an extremely powerful (but not omnipotent) extremely knowledgeable (but not omniscient) and extremely good (but not perfectly good) being orchestrates it. Or perhaps this occurs due to chance. And thus, with the help of extreme axiarchistic atheism, another pro-theistic good is captured by anti-theism. Indeed, this means that one of the strongest points in favor of pro-theism has been captured by anti-theism.

4.2.2.4 What Atheism Cannot Capture: God's Goodness

So, extreme axiarchistic atheism captures the following goods from pro-theism: the good of an afterlife, the good of cosmic justice, and the good of there being no gratuitous evil. However, there is one good that it cannot capture: God's goodness. Recall that God is *unlimited* (or, at least, *unsurpassable*) in value. So any world containing God will itself be unlimited (or unsurpassable) in value. This strongly counts in favor of pro-theism. But this good (clearly) cannot be captured by extreme axiarchistic atheism. This is because (obviously) the existence of God is incompatible with atheism: this pro-theistic good *just is* God's goodness, and no atheistic world (whether or not it be an extreme axiarchistic atheistic world) can contain such a thing, and so anti-theism cannot capture this good.

5. The Persistent Gap

So, given extreme axiarchistic atheism, anti-theism is able to capture most of the goods of pro-theism, since these goods are based on what God would do (e.g. orchestrate an afterlife) and not on God himself. The pro-theistic goods discussed in this chapter—the good of an afterlife, of cosmic justice, and of there being no gratuitous evil—all count strongly in favor of pro-theism: all of these undoubtedly make the world better and all obtain on (the traditional view of) theism. This is why it's significant that extreme axiarchistic atheism is able to capture these goods: by capturing these pro-theistic goods, it eliminates them as reasons to endorse pro-theism—at least when it is being compared with extreme axiarchistic atheism. This narrows the gap between pro-theism and anti-theism; it takes away some goods in favor of pro-theism.

So, the gap between pro-theism and anti-theism is narrowed—*narrowed*, but not *eliminated*. This is because, (at least) one pro-theistic good *is* dependent on God himself, namely, God's goodness. So, the cause for pro-theism has been weakened, but it still remains. For my part, I find it hard to see that this gap could ever be eliminated—while atheistic worlds arguably contain goods like autonomy and privacy,¹⁷ it's dubious to think that these goods could ever overwhelm the value of God's goodness. (If God's goodness is unlimited (or unsurpassable or maximal) it seems that any world containing him will necessarily be better than any world

¹⁷ I add the qualification "arguably" because I'm not convinced that the typical anti-theistic arguments for these conclusions work out in the end.

without him.) However, if it can be shown that God's goodness is not unlimited or that his value is surpassable, then, with the assistance of extreme axiarchistic atheism, a case for anti-theism can possibly be made: since there are several goods (arguably) unique to anti-theism, it will be possible (in principle) for anti-theism to overcome the gap with pro-theism. While I'm not optimistic about this strategy (and think pro-theism is true), it is (I think) the best route available for anti-theism. As such, I will briefly consider one such strategy for closing this gap.

To close this gap, the extreme axiarchistic atheist might hold that the best possible world is infinitely valuable thereby matching the value that God's existence brings with it.¹⁸ One potential worry here is—as hinted at earlier—that God is a *maximally great* being, and as such is a maximally valuable being.¹⁹ However, this means that if the best possible world matches God in terms of value—if it is maximally valuable—it isn't an atheistic world, since it would include God. Of course, the extreme axiarchistic atheist might respond by amending her view to this: the best possible world is one step under maximal value. This, of course, deals with the above worry—since it's not maximally valuable, it isn't a maximally great being, and so it's not a theistic world. But then it also won't threaten to capture the pro-theistic good under consideration here. This is because, again, God is maximally great and so maximally valuable, and hence his value will exceed anything that is a step under him. And hence this strategy for capturing this pro-theistic good is not promising.²⁰ Thus, the gap between pro-theism and anti-theism is persistent: not even axiarchism will eliminate it.

6. References

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¹⁸ Something like this strategy was suggested by Kirk Loughheed.

¹⁹ Asha Lancaster-Thomas suggested something like this.

²⁰ Perhaps one might argue that it moves anti-theism into striking distance: since it captures a substantial amount of God's goodness—the universe is only one step below him in terms of value—it makes it easier to acquire other goods that might close the gap. This is, I think, an avenue worth pursuing for the anti-theist.

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