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Aspirational theism and gratuitous suffering

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Abstract: **Philosophers have long wondered whether God exists; and yet, they have ignored the question of whether we should *hope* that He exists – call this stance *aspirational theism*. In this article, I argue that we have a weighty *pro tanto* reason to adopt this stance: theism offers a metaphysical guarantee against gratuitous suffering (i.e. God would not permit gratuitous suffering). On the other hand, few atheist alternatives offer such a guarantee – and even then, there are reasons to worry that they are inferior to the theistic alternative. Given this difference, we have a strong *pro tanto*, but not *all-things-considered*, reason to adopt aspirational theism.**

Introduction

Philosophers[1] have thought a lot about whether God exists, and a bit about the evaluative question of whether we should *prefer* that He exists. However, they haven't considered whether we should *hope* that He does. Some philosophers have answered the evaluative question affirmatively (cf. Kraay and Dragos (2013); Penner and Arbour (2018); this view is known as *pro-theism*), while others have answered negatively (cf. Nagel (1997), 130,[2] and to an extent, Kahane (2011) – this view is known *anti-theism*). In this article, I defend a distinct evaluative approach to God's existence: despite what we *believe* about the truth of theism, or what we prefer, we have a weighty *pro tanto* reason to *hope* that God exists (call this hopeful stance *aspirational theism* – we'll call the hope that theism is false *aspirational atheism*).

As we'll see later, the hope that God exists is a more constrained evaluative attitude than preferring that He does. There are good reasons to hold that this difference matters. Moreover, this evaluative approach has been unexplored in the philosophical literature. Finally, the prominent view *faith-as-hope* dovetails nicely with aspirational theism.

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The *pro tanto* reason in favour of theism might be formulated (roughly) as:

> Theism offers a metaphysical guarantee against gratuitous suffering;[3] while, atheistic alternatives cannot prima facie offer a *comparable* metaphysical guarantee. We should hope that all suffering is necessary, *ceteris paribus*. Thus, we have a strong *pro tanto* reason to adopt aspirational theism.

Before proceeding, I take theism to be the doctrine that *there necessarily exists an all-powerful, all-knowing, wholly loving being, who created the world.* We should *not* adopt aspirational theism because of the benefits that we might enjoy if beyond *mere* theism were true (e.g. reuniting with our loved ones in heaven), but rather because of the benefits that would obtain only if theism were true. Rather, I argue that because the truth of theism entails that every instance of suffering is non-gratuitous, we have a *pro tanto* reason to adopt aspirational theism, *ceteris paribus* (cf. Penner & Arbour (2018)).

Here's the layout of the article. First, I distinguish between *pro* and *aspirational* theism as evaluative attitudes toward theism. Next, I argue that a metaphysical guarantee against gratuitous suffering is a *pro tanto* reason to adopt aspirational theism, and then that it is implausible that there is a comparable guarantee offered by the atheistic alternatives. Finally, I argue that preventing gratuitous suffering is not an *all-things-considered* reason to adopt aspirational theism.

Preliminaries

Pro versus Aspirational Theism

First, there is the question of whether the existence of God would be a good thing (the axiological issue). Second, there is the issue of what sort of attitude we should take towards the possibility of theism, despite what we know about its truth value (the preference issue). The dialectic over the preference issue has primarily focused on whether we have good reason to adopt *pro-theism* or *anti-theism*. But there is a second kind of evaluative attitude we could take towards the possibility that God exists that we will explore in this article: *hoping* that He exists.

Kahane, in sketching *pro*-theism, writes:

> What the theist value claims give us, if correct, are reasons . . . to *prefer* God's existence to His inexistence. Now if it is good that God exists, and exceedingly bad if He does not, then we all have reason to wish that He exists. But to *rationally prefer* His existence to His non-existence, it is enough if a weaker comparative claim is true, that . . . It would be far better if God exists than if He does not. (Kahane (2011), 676; emphasis mine)

There is an important difference between *pro* and *aspirational* theism: pro-theism is a rational *preference* that God exists; aspirational theism is a rational *hope* that God exists. The most salient difference is that there could be instances where we are certain that theism is false (but not *necessarily* false) and yet prefer that God had existed anyway; but, rational hope would be an inappropriate evaluative attitude if we believed that theism were false.

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The issue taken up in this article is whether we should *hope* that God exists *given we assume that the world is arranged* in a manner consistent with our background knowledge (e.g. atheists and theists can agree that there are certain laws of nature). An issue worth exploring is whether we have good reason to adopt aspirational theism constrained by our background knowledge. There are, of course, related evaluative questions – but the issue of whether we should hope that God exists *if we hold the world is held constant*[4] has been ignored by philosophers. There are a couple of reasons that aspirational theism is worth examining quite apart from the discussion over *pro* versus *anti*-theism.

1. Against *pro*-theism, aspirational theism is rational *only if* theism is a genuine epistemic possibility. This is tied into the nature of hope (as we'll discuss next): a rational hope that p implies p is possible, but not certain; whatever is hoped for must be a genuine epistemic possibility (e.g. Sam could *prefer* that his mother not suffer gratuitously, even if he knew that she would; but Sam cannot *hope* that she not gratuitously suffer with such knowledge). Aspirational theism is worth taking seriously, quite apart from pro-theism, as the view has implications for things that matter: it could turn out that we suffer for very weighty moral reasons beyond our ken.
2. The metaphysical guarantee against gratuitous suffering, on theism, might facilitate trust in God for the prospective religious practitioner. Apparently gratuitous suffering is a popular evidential stumbling block and psychological obstacle to religious observance (and more so with belief). But if faith is a kind of hope, the metaphysical guarantee against gratuitous suffering provided by theism gives the prospective religious observer a reason to have faith, especially if such suffering is a stumbling block to her religious life.

The nature of hope

There has been a lot of discussion by philosophers over the nature of rational hope. There are a few aspects that are relevant to assessing whether aspirational theism is rational (cf. Martin (2013); Meirav (2009)). Roughly sketched, if an agent, S, hopes that p, then (i) S believes that p is a genuine epistemic possibility, but (ii) S cannot believe that p is certain – if we were certain that p, then there wouldn't be anything to hope for – and finally, (iii) S desires that p (Pojman (1986), 161–163). It should be noted that one *can* rationally entertain hopes about the past. Some philosophers hold that rational hope about the past must involve past events that are *epistemically opaque* (cf. Martin (2013), 68). Since we cannot change the past (cf. Smith (1997)), we cannot *rationally* hope that past matters of fact had been otherwise (e.g. Mary cannot *rationally hope* that John was faithful *if she knows* he cheated; but she can *rationally hope* if she *only suspects* that John cheated).

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Faith-as-hope

Some philosophers argue that religious faith is a kind of hope, not belief (cf. Pojman (1986); Himma (2006); Audi (2011), 74). As Pojman puts it:

> For many of these people God's existence is not self-evident, nor is it properly basic for them. They are troubled by the lack of evidence for God's existence and believe that the move made by some philosophers to set it into the foundations of one's noetic structure is not acceptable for them. Their prayer is, 'God, if you exist, show me better evidence.' (Pojman (1986), 158)

He continues:

> To believe *that God exists* is to believe that there is a being with certain necessary properties such as omnipotence . . . But to *believe-in God* implies only that one regards such a being as possibly existing and that one is committed to live *as if* such a being does exist. Whether it is rational to commit oneself in this way depends on the outcome of an analysis of comparative values in relationship to probable outcomes. It is the sort of assessment that goes on in any cost-benefit analysis. (*ibid.*, 170; emphasis mine)

On this view, faith is aspirational rather than doxastic: we *hope* that God exists. If theism entails the absence of gratuitous suffering, *and faith is a kind of hope*, then we have reason to have faith. Given the contentious nature of the debate over God's existence (specifically with regard to the weak evidence for the Christian faith: cf. Howard-Snyder (forthcoming)), we might hold that there remains sufficient epistemic room to adopt a *faith-as-hope* stance towards theism. In short, aspirational theism and faith-as-hope dovetail nicely where the prospective religious observer is concerned.

An advantage of this approach to faith, shared by aspirational theism, is that it avoids difficulties with the generally involuntary nature of belief formation. If faith is a kind of hope, then we need not attempt to *believe* that God exists; rather, we need only hope that He does. This avoids the issue of our lack of control over our belief-forming mechanisms (cf. Alston (1989); for compatibilist approaches to the issue of doxastic volunteerism, cf. Booth (2014)). There might be an approach to faith-as-belief that successfully deals with the implausibility of doxastic voluntarism; but if faith is a kind of hope, then where faith is concerned such issues are moot.

A preliminary objection

A critic might worry that evaluatively comparing theistic and atheistic worlds presupposes that there are possible worlds to ground comparisons. But this might not be wrong: on traditional theism, God either exists or doesn't exist *necessarily*. Thus, on such a view, whether God exists or not, there can be no possible worlds to ground comparisons between different attitudes. There is no nearest possible world where the truth value of the proposition 'God exists' differs from that of the actual world (cf. Kraay & Dragos (2013), 160; Mugg (2016)).

We'll deal with this difficulty by treating theism and atheism as *epistemic* possibilities. Although this is contentious, it is not clear why we can't evaluate our

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preferences and hopes by comparing genuine *epistemic* (rather than metaphysical) possibilities. After all, some philosophers accept that one can have a rational hope about the past *if* it's about an epistemically opaque matter (cf. Martin (2013), 68). For example, Sam can *rationally hope* that he passed the exam, although it was graded in the past. Presumably, this is because it is still a genuine epistemic possibility for Sam that he passed the test, even though as a matter of fact the issue is settled. But if hopes about past matters of fact could be rational if they are genuine epistemic possibilities, then it is unclear why the same wouldn't apply to the necessity of theism (i.e. we only need theism to be a genuine *epistemic* possibility).

The nature of gratuitous suffering

There is a lot of inscrutable suffering in the world. Street offers a graphic example:

> [A] drunk driver traveling 70 miles an hour the wrong way on a highway struck a limousine that was carrying six family members home from a wedding that had taken place earlier that day. In the crash, a seven-year-old girl, who had been a flower girl at the wedding, was decapitated. . . . the flower girl's five-year-old sister, father, and maternal grandparents were critically injured . . . the flower girl's mother, who had also been in the limousine, pulled herself from the wreckage and began searching for her family. She knew that her five-year-old daughter was alive because she could hear her moans, but as she searched the wreckage she found her seven-year-old daughter's decapitated head. The mother picked it up and clung to it, screaming to her husband that 'Katie is dead.' . . . the mother refused to give up her daughter's head, holding onto it for nearly an hour as she watched the rest of her family being cut from wreckage. (Street (2014), 175)

The pull of evidential arguments from evil is that there are instances of inscrutable suffering like that above. This kind of suffering arguably significantly lowers the probability of theism, *ceteris paribus* (Rowe (2001), 297). Philosophers who resist this inference typically reply that the inscrutable nature of such suffering is explained by the limits of our moral knowledge rather than the moral wrongness of permitting such suffering: if we had better moral knowledge, such suffering wouldn't seem morally gratuitous. This approach is inaptly[5] named *sceptical theism*: humans are 'not justified in making *all-things-considered* judgments about what God has done or would do in any given situation' (McBrayer (2010), 611; original emphasis).

The point here is that theistic and atheistic philosophers broadly agree that gratuitous suffering and God are mutually exclusive:[6] if the theist is able to (i) provide an explanation whereby all instances of inscrutable gratuitous suffering are morally justified; (ii) cast doubt on the claim that we're in a good epistemic position to know to any degree whether inscrutable suffering is gratuitous; or (iii) provide independent evidence that theism is true (e.g. a successful the cosmological argument) – as the truth of theism entails that there is no gratuitous suffering – she will have defanged the problem of evil (cf. Howard-Snyder &

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Howard-Snyder (1999), 117; Rowe (2001); Klaas (2016)). Each strategy assumes that if theism is true, there could be no *gratuitous* suffering.

This point has been made with regard to *pro*-theism in that if God's existence would preclude a very bad feature (i.e. gratuitous suffering) in any theistic world in which He exists, then that is a weighty *pro tanto* reason to be a *pro* theist (cf. Penner & Arbour (2018)). But *ipso facto* this would be a weighty *pro tanto* reason, particularly with regard to relationships and projects – and even a relationship with God – that matter to us, to adopt *aspirational* theism. We could operate with the hope that, despite how things appear, the suffering of those who matter is morally outweighed somehow.

Theism as a metaphysical guarantee

Many arguments from evil rest on the following conditional:

If God exists, then there is no gratuitous suffering (in a morally significant sense).

However, we should note that there is a distinction between token and type gratuitous suffering made by van Inwagen (1988, 1991): it might be that God must allow tokens of suffering to prevent a greater evil, or secure a greater good (i.e. this is a *stronger sense* in which suffering could be morally necessary); or it could be that God must allow types of suffering either to prevent greater evils, or to secure greater goods, even if every token of that suffering isn't morally offset (i.e. this is a *weaker sense* in which suffering might be morally necessary). For example, it might be *overall* good if the universe is law-governed, even if such laws allow instances of suffering that aren't morally outweighed (cf. Smith (1991)). We need not settle the matter here; we need only accept that *in a morally significant sense*, God would be a bulwark against gratuitous suffering in that 'God would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering He could, unless He could not do so *without thereby leaving things worse off than they otherwise would b*e' (Howard-Snyder & Howard-Snyder (1999), 117; emphasis mine).

Consider a different way to frame the point: if we had a button that when pressed would eliminate all *gratuitous* suffering from the world (while leaving everything of value intact), it is difficult to imagine that anyone, except perhaps sociopaths, would think that they lacked a strong moral *pro tanto* reason to press it. But if theism is true, then the implication would be *ipso facto* the same as pressing the button. If we have a strong *pro tanto* reason to press the button, then we likewise have a strong *pro tanto* reason to adopt aspirational theism.

The despair objection

Some readers might worry that the truth of theism would be reason to despair: even if the world were theistic, there would remain a good deal of horrible

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suffering. The worry is that in the face of such suffering, finding out that theism is true would be a reason to despair that the world makes even less sense than we might have otherwise hoped: we might despair that *even God cannot prevent such horrible suffering* without incurring a moral loss (e.g. just like realizing that even in our favoured utopia, many would suffer in ways that we hoped would have been alleviated). We might worry that something similar applies to theism: if even the greatest possible being is powerless to prevent horrific suffering without incurring a moral loss, that is a compelling reason to despair. The idea is that horrendous suffering, even if morally outweighed, encourages existential despair that threatens to rob a guarantee against gratuitous suffering of its normative value.

This reaction is wrongheaded. For one thing, it rests on the confusion that we are in the business of offering an *all-things-considered* reason to adopt aspirational theism, rather than a *pro tanto* reason; but I'll put that matter aside. That being said, it seems that despite the despair instilled by the prospect that God *exists* in a world with enormous suffering (and yet can do less about it than we would like), it would still be better if such suffering was morally offset. The reason that motivates aspirational theism is the hope that in the final analysis we live in a theistic world where such things are *morally far better than they would have otherwise been* (Howard-Snyder & Howard-Snyder (1999), 117).

Atheistic alternatives

We should turn to atheistic approaches to providing a guarantee against gratuitous suffering. I take an atheistic approach to be broadly any view that entails the falsity of theism. While this includes a wide range of views, I will examine a handful (e.g. lesser deities, Karma), and tentatively argue that they either cannot offer a guarantee against gratuitous suffering, or cannot offer one that is comparable to the theistic guarantee (*pace* Kahane (2018)). The claim here is not that we should reject atheist candidates for our aspirational allegiance; rather, my claim is that there is *defeasible* reason to suppose that theism is the best aspirational candidate; the burden thus rests on the aspirational atheist.

The lesser gods proposal

Suppose that there is a set of n lesser gods, who while not individually omnipotent, omniscient, and so forth could work together such that they could guarantee the lack of gratuitous suffering: either individual lesser deities could prevent certain kinds of gratuitous suffering, or they could collaborate across the board to prevent *all* gratuitous suffering (e.g. just like the *Justice League*, but deified). But then it would follow that a guarantee against gratuitous suffering wouldn't be a *pro tanto* reason that exclusively favoured *mono*theism (even if it favours a broadly theistic framework).

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Given that lesser gods *and* a traditional theistic God presumably offer a guarantee against gratuitous suffering (i.e. we cannot hope that *both* views are true in that they are mutually exclusive), we must decide where to assign our aspirational allegiance based on other factors. There are a couple reasons that favour traditional theism:

1. We might plausibly hold that where aspirational matters are concerned, *ceteris paribus*, we should favour a metaphysical hypothesis that is simpler than its competitors, i.e. there are fewer things that *could be* false on the simpler view than the more complex one, ceteris paribus. For example, if there were actually *n-1* lesser gods (i.e. we were wrong about the matter), where *n* lesser gods are required to prevent all gratuitous suffering, then the lesser gods wouldn't be able to prevent all gratuitous suffering; whereas, if the traditional theistic God existed, then He would have such an ability. In the absence of sufficient evidence, we should favour the hypothesis that is less likely to be false, *ceteris paribus*. This is an appeal to *ontic* parsimony.
2. The ability of the lesser gods to prevent gratuitous suffering is metaphysically divisible in that they must *somehow* work together. The abilities of the traditional theistic God aren't likewise divisible. It might not be clear why this should matter for our purposes. The reason is that, while the God of traditional theism is unified with regard to His power, knowledge, goodness, and his approach to preventing gratuitous suffering (i.e. He need not coordinate with anyone else to prevent suffering), the same cannot be said of the lesser gods. But then there is a risk that lesser gods, despite their ability in aggregate to prevent such suffering, might have coordination problems.

Even if we stipulate that the lesser gods have what it takes to prevent suffering *if they work together*, they might still have coordination problems in their effort to prevent gratuitous suffering (e.g. if three gods want to prevent evil *E* using Alpha, while three different gods want to prevent E using Beta, where Alpha and Beta are mutually exclusive procedures, then their efforts would be a standstill; on the other hand, the traditional theistic God could simply prevent E by using Beta). One might want to respond that we could specify that the lesser deities perfectly coordinate with each other. But this idea runs afoul of *aspirational* parsimony (i.e. *ceteris paribus*, we should favour simpler aspirations): the lesser gods proposal is a more specific aspiration than traditional theism in that on the lesser gods proposal we must hope that the lesser gods have the ability to:

(i) Either (a) as individual lesser gods, prevent specific kinds of gratuitous suffering, or (b) working together prevent all gratuitous suffering.

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(ii) Such gods can sufficiently coordinate their efforts such that they can achieve (a) or (b).

In contrast, if traditional theism holds, then we get (ii) for free (i.e. God doesn't have coordinate issues with himself). *Ceteris paribus*, we have reason to assign our aspirational allegiance to traditional theism because it is more aspirationally parsimonious than lesser theistic gods. Thus, the lesser gods proposal isn't compelling.

Law of nature proposal

Someone might object that there is an atheistic alternative that if true could provide a guarantee against gratuitous suffering that is on a par with that offered by theism, namely: a law of nature that somehow mandates the absence of gratuitous suffering. If a law of nature like that were possible, then it would erase any advantage that theism would have otherwise had with respect to preventing gratuitous suffering. Kahane (2018, 98) argues that Karma (more of a supernatural force, than a law of nature) could also ensure that suffering is morally outweighed without the need for divine agency; strictly speaking, we could secure the goods entailed by theism without theism.

The problem with this proposal is that it is *unclear how* a law of nature could operate in such a way that it would prevent all gratuitous suffering (e.g. a law of nature that would have to be sensitive to whether suffering is morally outweighed; but it is unclear how a law of nature could be sensitive to *that* sort of thing). The law of nature proposal violates the *how-possibly* constraint on what counts as genuine candidates for our aspirational loyalty (i.e. a rational hope must have an epistemic possibility as its target; and an epistemic possibility prima facie requires a how-possibly account). For example, I might *hope* that I win the lottery every time that I play. But this is foolish in that it is far from *how* I could hope to be so lucky (e.g. barring psychic powers) given how the world works.

But a law of nature is too prima facie *murky* a proposal to count as a genuine epistemic possibility with regard to preventing gratuitous suffering. It is unclear *how there could possibly* be a law of nature that operated like that. For example, our suffering might be morally outweighed if it permits us to develop character traits which wouldn't have otherwise developed; but, to be sensitive to how best to inculcate such character traits, the laws of nature must be sensitive to the relevant counterfactuals, psychological facts, and so forth. But, prima facie, laws of nature couldn't do such things. God *ex hypothesi* has the cognitive and causal wherewithal required to track relevant facts, possess maximal moral and casual knowledge, and so on such that He could prevent gratuitous suffering. By contrast, it is simply unclear how laws of nature could do likewise (e.g. Karma prima facie lacks a mechanism to track the relevant moral facts and so forth).

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Platonic Good proposal

Next, someone might suppose that the Platonic Good could prevent gratuitous suffering much like its theistic counterpart in that 'the Platonic truth that the ethical requiredness of the world is itself responsible for the world's existence . . . or perhaps a creatively powerful ethical requirement for the world to exist' (Leslie (2007), 19). The idea here is that if the world is governed by the Platonic Good, the world exists because it is better that it is exists than that it doesn't; it is *overall* better that the world exists than that it doesn't. The existence of the world is ethically required in that it would be contradictory if the world failed to exist. We might then suppose that the Platonic Good could also prevent gratuitous suffering.

There is, however, a serious worry with the Platonic Good proposal: it is unclear how an abstract ethical principle could *causally* influence *any* concrete states of affairs.[7] But causal influence is prima facie necessary for a guarantee against gratuitous suffering.

As Leslie recognizes, '[Being] ethically marked out for existence, ethically necessary or required, contains nothing about influencing the world. It isn't one and the same concept as that of being marked out *causally*' (Leslie (2007), 22–23; original emphasis). But this is *deeply worrying*. The Platonic Good is the wrong metaphysical tool for the task at hand; the Platonic Good simply cannot *causally influence the world*. In contrast, God can causally influence states of affairs *ex hypothesi* (e.g. He grants petitionary prayer). Abstract entities are causally inert, and thus cannot do the kind of explanatory work that we would require of aspirational candidates (cf. Baras (2017)). The Platonic Good lacks the causal power necessary to prevent gratuitous suffering. Thus, the Platonic Good proposal isn't worthy of our aspirational allegiance.

The contingency proposal

We might hope that, as a *contingent matter*, every instance of suffering is morally outweighed; we're lucky that there is no gratuitous suffering. By implication, God wouldn't be required.

The worry, however, is that the contingency proposal cannot *guarantee* that each and every instance of suffering is morally outweighed as it would be merely a matter of luck. But a guarantee against such suffering is appealing. If the contingency proposal is true, then it would be accidental that gratuitous suffering is avoided; even if we grant that such a proposal could compete with theism with respect to *the mere absence of gratuitous suffering*, its absence would be modally fragile; whereas it would be modally robust if theism is true. It is more satisfying to hope for a metaphysical guarantee against gratuitous suffering than to hope that as a matter of brute fact there isn't as a matter of luck. The idea here is that the absence of gratuitous suffering being a matter of sheer luck is dissatisfying: it would *cry out for an explanation*; and yet, the contingency proposal *ex hypothesi* can't offer one.

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Not an all-things-considered reason

Genuine solitude and privacy

Given our discussion, readers might wonder why a guarantee against gratuitous suffering is only a *pro tanto* reason to adopt aspirational theism, instead of an *all-things-considered* reason.

For one thing, it could be that reasons that we might hope that theism is true are outweighed by reasons to hope that theism is false. An example of a *pro tanto* reason to adopt aspirational atheism is defended by Kahane (2011, 682–685; cf. Kahane (2018)): there might be individuals who greatly value *genuine privacy and solitude*[8] such that God's existence would be *worse for them overall*. But such a reason is only applicable to specific individuals; it doesn't follow that overall it would be impersonally better if theism were true. The *pro tanto* reason that I defend favours an *impersonal* aspirational theism (and only favours *personal* aspirational theism for some individuals).

There are a couple of reasons to worry that, whatever the value of genuine solitude and privacy for some individuals, it is a good deal less weighty as a *pro tanto* reason to adopt aspirational *atheism* than a guarantee against gratuitous suffering is a weighty *pro tanto* reason to adopt aspirational *theism*.

1. It is implausible that God (who is wholly good *ex hypothesi*) knowing everything about us is *as bad or worse as* a state of affairs preventing gratuitous suffering is good. Even if we grant Kahane that privacy and solitude *is* a *pro tanto* good reason to adopt aspirational *atheism*, it is difficult to see how this normative calculus would favour aspirational atheism *overall*, even for select individuals. The view that genuine privacy and solitude are a decisive reason favouring *personal* anti-theism (and aspirational atheism) downplays how horribly horrendous it would be if it was also *morally pointless* (cf. Penner & Arbour (2018), 201).
2. But there is a deeper problem with Kahane's claim that privacy and solitude are a *pro tanto* reason in favour of anti-theism (and aspirational atheism): this bad-making feature, in a theistic context, is prima facie necessary for what is arguably a greater good, namely: the unconditional love of a wholly good God. The love of God, given His maximal knowledge of us, is deeply affirming of our individuality: He knows everything about us, and yet still loves us. It should be emphasized that *without* complete knowledge of us *qua individuals*, God's love wouldn't be nearly as affirming as it otherwise would be if God knows us maximally. Even if we grant that for some individuals genuine privacy and solitude are a *pro tanto* reason to adopt aspirational atheism, such goods are secured by losing out on what is prima facie a weightier good.

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The impossibility objection

A critic might object that given the fitness conditions of rational hope, we lack a *pro tanto* reason to adopt aspirational theism if theism either *must be false* (cf. Rachels (1971); Whitcomb (2012)), or *must be true* (cf. Plantinga (1974), 197–217). On the standard account of rational hope, we cannot hope for what we believe to be impossible or certainly true (e.g. we can't rationally hope that Gandhi wasn't murdered because of what *we know* about the past). If we believe that theism *must be false* (or *must be true*), then we can't have a *pro tanto* reason to adopt aspirational theism.

Suppose that arguments for the claim that God cannot (or must) exist are plausible enough such that we shouldn't dismiss them (call them *impossibility arguments*). We might then wonder what we should make of such a challenge, given the thesis of the article. Even if we grant that God must exist or not *necessarily*, we still have a *pro tanto* reason to endorse aspirational theism. One reason is that such arguments, even if they are prima facie plausible, rely on the kind of reasoning about which one could easily be mistaken. We sometimes make mistakes when we reason about abstract metaphysical and normative claims that impossibility arguments rely upon. The history of philosophy is replete with examples.

There are a couple of reasons to think that theism is a genuine epistemic possibility, even if we find impossibility arguments compelling.

1. Many of us have revised our take on contentious philosophical issues in the past. It is implausible to suppose that we've been so rarely mistaken about such matters that we can be certain that (e.g.) the existence of God is *impossible*. Our mixed track record on such matters should give us pause about similar matters. We often disagree with past versions of ourselves, and we probably have beliefs that will contradict our beliefs in the future (cf. Matheson (2014); Frances (2016), 289). Indeed, if we were in full agreement with our past and future selves, then there is good reason to worry that our beliefs have more to do with a lack of critical and searching engagement than with their plausibility.
2. Widespread and informed disagreement among philosophers about such matters (cf. Licon (2012); Kornblith (2013); Bourget & Chalmers (2014)) is prima facie good evidence to hold such views with a degree of epistemic humility (i.e. slightly lower the degree of credence we assign to such matters). It is plausible to suppose that (at least) some philosophers are equally rational and informed about such matters, and yet still mutually disagree. Without a sufficient epistemic tie-breaker, impossibility arguments don't prima facie preclude *the epistemic possibility that theism is true* – if one could be wrong about impossibility arguments *for all one knows*, theism is a genuine epistemic possibility.

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Doing philosophy with epistemic humility is not a good reason to significantly lower the degree of credence that we assign to our favoured philosophical positions; but it is a good reason to place some credence in the epistemic possibility that we we're mistaken. Aspirational theism and atheism prima facie require that theism and atheism are genuine epistemic possibilities.

Conclusion

I've argued that we have a strong *pro tanto* reason to adopt aspirational theism: if God exists, then there would be no gratuitous suffering. We've also covered a few atheistic alternatives to determine if they offer a comparable metaphysical guarantee worthy of our aspirational allegiance. I've argued that they prima facie do not. However, despite their problems, I am hesitant to conclude that they ultima facie lack the ability to compete with theism for our aspirational allegiance. In a nutshell, this article is intended to explore uncharted conceptual territory in providing a compelling reason to *hope* that theism is true – and hopefully encourage further inquiry.

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Notes

1. Thanks to an anonymous referee for comments on an earlier draft; the article is far better as a result.
2. Nagel (1997) might be construed as an *aspirational* atheist, rather than an *anti-theist*. He writes that 'I *hope* there is no God' (*ibid*., 130; emphasis mine). But it doesn't matter for our purposes.
3. The matter isn't straightforward; however, I discuss this in some detail in the section 'Theism as a metaphysical guarantee'.
4. Of course, the more we hold that world constant in such comparisons, then the more mysterious it is that He could somehow ensure that all suffering is non-gratuitous. See the section 'Law of nature proposal' for more on this point.
5. The term 'sceptical theism' is a misnomer in that (a) one doesn't have to be a *theist* to be a *sceptical theist*, and (b) one need not be sceptical writ large, but rather sceptical that we can infer whether an instance of suffering is gratuitous on the basis of our knowledge of moral goods (cf. Howard-Snyder (2014)).
6. There are a few philosophers who hold that God and gratuitous suffering are compossible: cf. van Inwagen (1988); *Idem* (1991); Hasker (1992); Almeida (2012), 175–179, 192–193.
7. The Platonic Good also prima facie runs afoul of the *how-possibly* aspirational constraint.
8. Hitchens once compared theism to a 'celestial North Korea'. This is extreme, but it is *roughly* in the axiological of Kahane's point: despite the best intentions of a wholly loving God, we might find it unsettling that He knows *all there is to know* about us.

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