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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Pointless atheism

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Abstract

Say *theism* is the view that an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly loving, and perfectly good being exists. And say *pointless atheism* occurs just in case there's an atheist who isn't resistant to belief in God, and no greater good comes about on account of this atheist's non-belief. In this article, I show that if two prominent views about evil and divine hiddenness are accepted, theism is compatible with pointless atheism – a result hitherto unnoticed. Furthermore, not only is theism compatible with pointless atheism, it *entails* pointless atheism. This is significant because many objections to the argument from divine hiddenness have tried to show that all instances of non-resistant atheism are required for a greater good. But if I'm right, given theism, there need not be a point to non-resistant atheism. Indeed, we should *expect* there to be pointless atheism.

Keywords: divine hiddenness; non-belief; problem of evil; atheism

The argument from hiddenness

Say theism is the view that God – an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly loving, and perfectly good being – exists. Many people don't believe in God. And arguably many non-believers are *non-resistant* to belief in God – they would believe in God if only they had sufficient reason to do so (e.g. religious experience or a persuasive argument for theism). But if God exists, his omnipotence makes it such that he has the power to make all those not resistant to belief in him believe, his omniscience makes it such that he knows what it would take to make those non-resistant believe in him, his perfect love makes it such that he wants what's best for all his creation, and his perfect goodness makes it such that he always does what's right and never does what's wrong. But then – so the argument goes – there probably wouldn't be non-resistant non-believers, or as I shall call them non-resistant atheists.[1] This is because having a relationship with God is (arguably) in the best interest of all persons, and this means – if God is perfectly loving – he would be open to such a relationship. And, moreover, *believing* God exists is necessary to have a relationship with him – you can't have a relationship with a person if you don't believe she exists.[2] So, at the very least, God would ensure those who aren't resistant to having a relationship with him would believe he exists. This is a *minimum* requirement of theism. However, there (at least) probably are (or have been) some non-resistant atheists: we all know people who want to believe in God and yet can't bring themselves to do so. Moreover, we know that, historically, certain persons have lacked the concept of God, and hence couldn't believe in God. So, since (at least probably) there are or have been some

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non-resistant atheists, it follows that, probably, God doesn't exist.[3] Call this The Hiddenness Argument.

There have been numerous challenges presented to The Hiddenness Argument. Some argue there are goods that require the existence (or the permission of the existence) of non-resistant atheism, and that God would likely bring about these goods (e.g. Dustin Crummett 2015, Travis Dumsday 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2018; Daniel Howard-Snyder 2015, Kirk Lougheed 2018) and others have expressed skepticism about this requirement (e.g. Hud Hudson 2017 and Perry Hendricks 2023). It's not my purpose to adjudicate this debate here, so I won't consider the plausibility of these responses. Instead, below, I will explicate one particular response to The Hiddenness Argument that appears to be relatively popular, and tease out its implications.

Crummett (2015), Dumsday (2010), and Richard Swinburne (1998) all defend The Responsibility Objection to The Hiddenness Argument. Roughly, the thought behind The Responsibility Objection is that it's good for us to come to know God, his purposes, and so on through participation in communities in which we are mutually responsible for each other's coming to know these things (Crummett 2015). Moreover, it's good for us *to be responsible* for helping others come to know God, his purposes, and so on. This good – the good of having this kind of responsibility – makes it such that it's worth the non-belief it requires.[4] So, at least some non-resistant atheism – the kind required for this sort of responsibility – isn't a problem for theism. Of course, there may be other reasons why God allows non-resistant atheism – The Responsibility Objection doesn't claim it's the only reason God allows non-belief – but this is at least one reason why God allows (at least some) non-resistant atheism.

There's some appeal to this view: being responsible for another person coming to know important truths is a good thing. For example, Daryl Davis is personally responsible for over 200 members of the Klu Klux Klan leaving the Klan.[5] That is no doubt a good and admirable thing for him to have done. And this responsibility of ours to help others come to know important moral truths is indeed valuable. Moreover, being responsible for helping someone have a relationship with another person is good. For example, if I'm responsible for helping an adopted child come to know her long-lost mother, I've done something good. And this suggests that *if* having a relationship with God is in one's best interest (as defenders of The Hiddenness Argument maintain), *then* it's good for us to have the responsibility of bringing others into this relationship. So, there's at least some plausibility to The Responsibility Objection – there's some plausibility to the claim that God would allow non-resistant atheism in order to allow us to have the valuable and important responsibility involved with helping others come to know him.[6]

Obviously, there are objections that can and have been made to this view.[7] However, it isn't my purpose to adjudicate this dispute here. Instead, my purpose is to tease out a novel implication of The Responsibility Objection. So, I'm just going to *assume* that the responsibility objection succeeds to see what follows.[8]

The problem of gratuitous evil

Evil is often taken to be a problem for theism. Some think evil is incompatible with God's existence (e.g. J.L. Mackie 1955), and others think that some fact about evil poses an evidential problem for theism (e.g. Paul Draper 1989; Draper, forthcoming and William Rowe 1979, 1996). There have been many proposed solutions to the problem of evil. For example, some argue that free will explains (at least partially) why God allows evil (e.g. Swinburne 1998), others argue that building connections between persons plays an important role (e.g. Robin Collins 2013), and still others claim the best possible worlds contain evil, because

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these – the best possible worlds – contain incarnation and atonement, which require evil (e.g. Alvin Plantinga 2004).

For my purposes, I want to focus on one particular variant of the problem of evil, namely, the problem of *gratuitous* evil. An evil is said to be gratuitous (or *axiologically gratuitous*)[9] just in case its permission isn't required to prevent an evil (or set of evils) equally bad or worse or to produce a greater good (or set of goods).[10] Rowe (1996) claims there are evils for which we recognize no greater good of which their permission was required to produce. And so, he infers, these evils are probably gratuitous.[11] However, claims Rowe, God's existence is incompatible with gratuitous evil. And so, probably, God doesn't exist.

There have been numerous responses to Rowe's argument: some try to cast doubt upon whether there is gratuitous evil (e.g. Swinburne 1998), others argue that gratuitous evil is compatible with theism (e.g. Peter Van Inwagen 2006 and Justin Mooney 2019), and still others cast doubt upon the inference from our lack of recognition of a good that would justify God in allowing evil to the conclusion that there probably is no such reason (e.g. Bergmann 2001, 2009, 2012; Hendricks 2023; Howard-Snyder 2009; Hudson 2014). However, one response in particular is of interest for my purposes, namely William Hasker's (Hasker 1992, 2004, 2008). Hasker doesn't dispute that there's gratuitous evil. Rather, he argues, roughly, that if all evils are required for a greater good, it would undermine one of our best reasons for preventing evil – it would morally *demotivate* us. And so God *must* allow gratuitous evil to avoid this result. In other words, if we believe God exists *and* that all evils lead to a greater good, one of our best reasons for preventing evil is undermined, and we lose motivation for preventing the evil. For example, suppose I come across Sarah assaulting Sally. And suppose I'm a theist and I believe God wouldn't allow evil unless its permission was required for a greater good. If that's the case, I know that if I allow this assault to continue, it will result in a greater good. Thus, I lose one major reason for intervening: if I prevent the assault, I'm thereby preventing a greater good from obtaining – the world is going to be *better* if I allow the assault to continue.[12] So, I shouldn't intervene – or, at least, my best reason for intervening has been undermined.[13] Because of this, Hasker argues, God *must* allow gratuitous evil – if he doesn't, we will become morally demotivated.

While Hasker primarily frames the issue *psychologically* – we would lose motivation to intervene – one can also run his argument in terms of *rationality and reasons.*[14] Assume we are irrational if we act in a way that goes against what we have most reason to do. And assume that every instance of evil leads to a greater good. If that's true, we lose one – and perhaps our strongest – reason for preventing evil. That is, one of our strongest reasons for preventing evil is that the world is made worse off on account of the evil. But if that's not true – if all evils result in a greater good – that's no longer a reason for us to prevent evil, and it may be irrational for us to do so – we would be making the world worse by doing so, after all! Insofar as rationality is valuable, God has reason to ensure that his creatures act rationally when preventing evil. And this means God would not ensure there's no gratuitous evil. For my purposes, it doesn't matter which way we frame Hasker's argument – although, I'll note I find it more plausible when framed in terms of rationality and reasons.

Of course, objections can and have been raised to Hasker's argument (e.g. Klaas Kraay 2019). It's not my purpose to evaluate Hasker's position or objections to it here. Rather, I want to tease out an implication of this sort of reasoning when it's paired with The Responsibility Objection discussed above. So, I'm going to just assume it's correct for the sake of argument to see what follows.[15]

Pointless atheism

As mentioned above, many have cited particular goods or reasons that God has for allowing non-resistant atheism. However, I'll argue here that – assuming The Responsibility

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Objection and that *something* like Hasker's view is correct – theism is compatible with – indeed, predicts – *pointless atheism*, that is, non-resistant atheists whose non-belief doesn't result in a greater good.[16]

Why think that theism and pointless atheism are compatible given these assumptions? Here's why. First, assume that God may allow non-resistant atheism *only if* it's required for a greater good. (This seems to be an assumption made by both opponents and proponents of The Hiddenness Argument – no one has argued, to my knowledge, to the contrary.) Second, assume The Responsibility Objection is correct, that is, God allows *at least some*[17] non-resistant atheism because it's required for humans to be responsible in bringing others into relationship with God, and so on. Given these assumptions, if theism is true, at least some non-resistant atheism is permitted in order to bring about a greater good, namely, the good of our having the responsibility to help others come to know God.

At this point, it should be clear that Hasker-esque reasons come into play. Suppose it's true that God would allow some bad state of affairs only if it resulted in a greater good. Non-resistant atheism, of course, is a kind of bad state of affairs. Given this, it follows that non-resistant atheism occurs *only if* there's a greater good it's required for. So, if it's true that non-resistant atheism only occurs if its permission is required for a greater good *and* God allows (at least some) non-resistant atheism to give humans the responsibility to bring others into relationship with him, *then* our best reason for helping others come into relationship with God has been undermined.[18] This is because, given these assumptions, it follows that all instances of non-resistant atheism are cases in which either (i) they will come to know God or (ii) their continued lack of relationship with God will result in a greater good. So, any case in which one might try to help a non-resistant atheist come to know God will be unmotivated (or, less motivated): we know that *if* the non-resistant atheist remains an atheist, a greater good will come from it. And so we need not intervene to help this person come to know God – after all, if we don't, the world will be better![19] So, if God wants us to be responsible for helping others come to know him, he needs to allow instances of non-resistant atheism that *don't* bring about a greater good, that is, God needs to allow *pointless* atheism. This is the only way for us to have responsibility for bringing others into relationship with him *and* for us to be motivated (or, have reason) to do so. This result is surprising, for it shows that not only is non-resistant atheism compatible with theism, *pointless* atheism is compatible with theism. Furthermore, it follows from this that theism *entails* pointless atheism, meaning we should *expect* there to be pointless atheism if theism is true – a result more surprising than finding a Dutchman with a small nose!

Objections

In this section, I'll consider several objections one might raise to my above argument.

The problem of the amount of pointless atheism

One might claim the *amount* of pointless atheism poses a problem of theism. So, even though God might allow some pointless atheism, he wouldn't allow as much pointless atheism as we find in our world. There's much to say about this charge, but I won't dispute it here.[20] Rather, my purpose is just to show the compatibility of pointless atheism with theism, given the assumptions made above.

A paradox?

One might claim that I've reached a paradoxical result: I've claimed, given theism, there's pointless atheism, but, given the assumptions laid out above, there is a point: purportedly pointless atheism is, given my argument, required to ensure that humans are responsible

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for, and motivated to, help others come to know God. Hence, atheism isn't pointless after all!

Is there a paradox here? In brief, no. Here's why. My argument above shows there are instances of non-resistant atheism for which no greater good comes about, that is, there's pointless atheism. However, this is compatible with there being a reason (or greater good) for the *class* of non-resistant atheism – that there is a reason for the whole doesn't entail there's a reason for each individual part.[21] Put differently, there is in fact *pointless atheism* – non-resistant non-belief that could be eliminated without making the world worse – despite there being a *global reason* for non-resistant atheism. So, there's no paradox here. At most, there's a 'pair of docs' – the pair of docs in this case being Dr Philip Swenson and Dr William Hasker mentioned above.

What if theists remain motivated?

Perhaps one would object that there are many theists who actually think that everything in this world is for the best, and yet they continue to proselytize. So, it looks like, for this group, motivation to help others come to know God hasn't been undermined even though they think all non-resistant atheism results in a greater good. But this seems to conflict with my argument above.

Several lines of reply are in order here. First, this is a general objection to Hasker's argument, which it's not my intention to defend here. (Again, I'm making a conditional argument that assumes Hasker's view is correct.) Second, while it's likely that theists described above exist, it's also likely there are theists whose motivation *would* be undermined if all instances of non-resistant atheism resulted in a greater good. So, God would have reason to allow pointless atheism so that group of theists wouldn't have their motivation undermined. Indeed, nothing in my argument requires that *all persons* lose such motivation – that some would be demotivated is sufficient for my purposes. Third, and more importantly, perhaps it's a sociological fact that some people continue to proselytize despite recognizing that a greater good would come about if they didn't. But then we should think that those people are *irrational*. So, insofar as God would be interested in producing creatures who act rationally in response to reasons, this means that God would make it such that one would be *rational* in proselytizing, meaning that he would allow pointless atheism.[22]

Objections to Hasker and the responsibility objection

At this point, one might raise objections to Hasker's argument or to The Responsibility Objection. Indeed, many have raised objections to these views. However, it isn't my purpose to defend these positions here. Rather, my purpose is to show that if these views are accepted, we get a surprising result: pointless atheism is compatible with theism. Indeed, it's *expected* given theism. So, insofar as these views are plausible, it's plausible to think that we should expect pointless atheism if theism is true.

Conclusion

I've argued that, given two assumptions,[23] it follows that theism is compatible with (and perhaps we should expect there to be) pointless atheism. This has the result that theists need not explain all instances of non-resistant atheism. Instead, given theism, we should *expect* there to be pointless atheism.

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Notes

1. Atheism includes, here, those who believe God doesn't exist, but also those who lack belief in God (e.g. agnostics, animists, etc.).
2. See Cullison (2010) for a powerful challenge to this view.
3. Forms of this argument that claim that non-resistant atheism are *incompatible* with theism can be found in Schellenberg (1993; 2015). And arguments for thinking that non-resistant atheism (or its pattern) is less likely given theism than atheism can be found in Andrew Blanton (forthcoming), Rasmussen and Leon (2019), Stephen Maitzen (2006), and Graham Oppy (2013). These latter arguments, that merely claim non-resistant atheism is evidence against theism, as opposed to claiming that non-resistant atheism is *incompatible* with theism, are far more plausible. See Charity Anderson (2021) for an excellent statement of the evidential problem non-resistant atheism poses to theism.
4. Crummett's version of the responsibility objection is more encompassing than Dumsday's and Swinburne's. But this isn't important for our purposes here.
5. See Brown (2017).
6. To be clear, the good discussed in The Responsibility Objection is a good for those who have said responsibility – it's a good *for theists.* That's supposed to be the greater good (or reason) for why God allows non-resistant atheism – without it, there wouldn't be this kind of responsibility. Here, a reviewer suggests that it might be argued a theist can have this kind of responsibility even if an atheist remaining a non-believer leads to a greater good. In other words, even if a greater good comes about from an atheist remaining an atheist, there's still a reason for the theist to proselytize. This is partially right – but it won't affect The Responsibility Objection. That's because the good that comes about from converting an atheist (or: the reason one has to convert an atheist) is *overridden* by the even greater good (or: stronger reason) the theist has to remain silent. To illustrate, consider a case in which one's child is fasting before an important medical operation: the child must fast so the procedure can be performed in optimal conditions. In this case, the parent nevertheless has a reason to feed her child (or: there's a good that would come about from feeding her child, i.e. she'd cease to be hungry), but she nevertheless *shouldn't* do so, because she has stronger reason to not feed her (or: a greater good comes from not feeding her). Similarly, the theist might have *a* reason to proselytize, but it's overridden by other considerations (in this case, the greater good that comes from not doing so).
7. See e.g. Blanton (forthcoming) and Schellenberg (1993: 191–199; 2007: 211).
8. Those that reject The Responsibility Objection can take my argument to be a conditional in which the antecedent is false.
9. Hendricks (2023).
10. Hereafter, for the sake of brevity, I will call an evil gratuitous just in case it isn't required to secure a greater good, where 'greater good' means a singular greater good, a set of goods that collectively is greater than the evil in question, or the prevention of an equally bad or worse evil (or set of evils).
11. To be clear, here (and elsewhere) by 'these evils' I mean *the permission of these evils.* When I speak about gratuitous evil, I'm speaking about evil *whose permission* isn't required in order to achieve a greater good or prevent an equally bad or worse evil.
12. Indeed, some theists claim that all evil must make the *sufferer* better off, e.g. Adams (1999) and Stump (2010). The problem is even worse in that case. This is because a theist will think that any suffering that occurs will be better *for the sufferer*, and so any suffering I prevent will prevent the sufferer from obtaining a greater good.
13. To be clear, Hasker's claim is that the *individual* evils will be gratuitous, but the class of evils won't be (since the class is required for a greater good – moral motivation – but the individual evils (or, at least, some of them) aren't. In other words, God could eliminate a particular evil without making the world worse but he couldn't eliminate the entire class of evils without making the world worse.
14. Something like this is suggested in Crummett (2017). To be clear, Hasker himself at times discusses the argument in terms of reasons and rationality.
15. Those who reject Hasker's view can take my argument to be a conditional with a false antecedent.

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16. Not long ago, I was convinced by Philip Swenson that each of these assumptions is individually sufficient for this result, i.e. each assumption individually entails pointless atheism. However, I became convinced of this too late in the publication process to make this change. Nevertheless, it's worth noting that (arguably) either assumption alone is sufficient for my argument.

17. To be clear, The Responsibility Objection isn't committed to the view that the *only* good that comes from non-resistant atheism is responsibility based. In fact, as a reviewer points out, if one thinks that responsibility is the only good that comes from non-resistant atheism, things get complicated. Here's why. Below, I argue that if we know that every instance of non-resistant atheism results in a greater good, we lose motivation to help others come to know God – if we don't do so, then a greater good comes about, after all! (Or, put differently, helping others come to know God would make the world worse.) However, if responsibility is the *only* good that comes from non-resistant atheism, one might argue that a theist should still try to help atheists come to know God because *that's* why God permitted non-resistant atheism – doing nothing isn't going to lead to a separate, greater good.

However, even if responsibility is the only reason God allows non-resistant atheism, one would still lose *her* reason for helping another come to know God. After all, if the non-resistant atheist remains an atheist, *someone else* will help her come to know God. Moreover, the longer one remains a non-resistant atheist, the greater the good would have to be to outweigh it, i.e. the more one puts off helping others come to know God, the greater the responsibility based good will be when that person actually becomes a theist. And this means that one loses motivation to help others come to know God, since putting it off will result in a greater good. (Put differently: successfully proselytizing now instead of later would make the world worse.) In other words, if one puts off helping others come to know God, she's still ensuring that an even greater good comes about, and this erases (or lessens) her reason for proselytizing. Indeed, this provides her with positive reason to put off doing so.

18. A reviewer suggests that this would mean theists shouldn't respond to The Hiddenness Argument. However, this would only be true insofar as theists are responding to the argument in order to benefit non-resistant atheists. They may have other purposes for doing so (e.g. intellectual curiosity). Additionally, this reviewer suggests that it could be that a particular theist converting an atheist might be the *greater good.* But this won't work, since *if* the theist doesn't convert the atheist, an even greater good will come about.

19. Indeed, if Adams (1999) and Stump's (2010) reasoning can be applied to non-resistant atheism, it follows that it's better *for non-resistant atheists* to remain atheists.

20. One issue is that it's tough to gauge how much pointless atheism there is in the world, and it's also tough to see just how much pointless atheism it takes to pose a problem for theism. Another issue is that it's tough to see how much pointless atheism is required for motivation. Additionally, skeptical theism will likely come into play at this point.

21. This is akin to Swenson's (2022: 190) distinction between actual good theodicies and prevention theodicies.

22. This response takes the second way of framing Hasker's view mentioned above. See Section 2.

23. Again, I've come to think that both assumptions aren't needed: each is individually sufficient for my purposes. See footnote 16.

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