

# On the Objective Meaningful Life Argument: A Response to Kirk Lougheed

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*ABSTRACT:* Kirk Lougheed has argued that the Objective Meaningful Life Argument establishes a type of anti-theism, the view that a theistic God's existence would make things worse and thus it's rational to prefer that God not exist. The objective version of this argument is said to be an improvement over my subjective version of the Meaningful Life Argument. I argue that Lougheed's version fares no better than the subjective version.

*RÉSUMÉ :* Selon Kirk Lougheed, favoriser une version objective de l'argument du sens de la vie (Meaningful Life Argument) établit une sorte d'antithéisme, c'est-à-dire une perspective qui maintient que l'existence d'un Dieu théiste aggraverait les choses et qu'il est donc plus rationnel de préférer que Dieu n'existe pas. Cette version objective est présentée par Lougheed comme une amélioration par rapport à ma version subjective de l'argument du sens de la vie. Je soutiens que la version de Lougheed ne réussit pas mieux que la version subjective que j'ai développée, puis rejetée.

**Keywords:** theism, pro-theism, anti-theism, meaningful life, Thomas Nagel

## I. Introduction

Roughly speaking, the emerging axiology of theism literature addresses the positive or negative impact that the existence of the God of theism would have on a possible world.<sup>1</sup> Intuitions about the axiological implications of God's

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of key themes in the axiology of theism debate, see Davis (2014); Kahane (2011); Kraay and Dragos (2013); Mawson (2012); Penner (2015). For an extended exploration of themes related to the axiology of theism, see Kraay (2018).

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existence do not neatly subdivide among theists, atheists, and agnostics. For example, one might be a confirmed and rational atheist, yet think that it would on balance be a good thing if, say, an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good agent *were* to exist; following convention, we can call this position ‘pro-theism.’ Conversely, one might think that, whatever benefits God’s existence may add to a world, the cost is greater than the gain such that it would overall be worse if God did indeed exist; again, following convention, we can call this position ‘anti-theism.’<sup>2</sup> In a recent article in this journal, Kirk Loughheed has contributed to the ongoing debates about the axiological implications of theism with his clear and insightful “Anti-Theism and the Objective Meaningful Life Argument.”<sup>3</sup> A good part of Loughheed’s paper is an analysis of my (2015) “Personal Anti-Theism and the Meaningful Life Argument.”<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I (a) review Loughheed’s analysis of the argument I developed in my 2015 paper, and (b) critique the interesting, but ultimately unsuccessful, argument Loughheed develops as a reformulated and objectivized version of my earlier argument.

## II. Meaningful Life Arguments: Subjective and Objective Versions

In the original (2015) article, I developed thoughts initially expressed by Thomas Nagel, and subsequently expanded by Guy Kahane, into the more formalized “Meaningful Life Argument.”<sup>5</sup> The essence of the Meaningful Life Argument is that if there are properties an agent takes to be necessary for a her to have a meaningful life, and it’s the case that God’s existence would preclude her ability to exemplify those properties, then it’s rational for her to think that God’s existence would make things worse for her, and as such it’s rational for her to prefer that there be no God. By “a meaningful life,” I simply mean “what an ideal agent would say, on reflection, what makes a life worth living.”<sup>6</sup> As Loughheed notes, I reject the Meaningful Life Argument for two main reasons.

First, criteria for the meaningfulness of life can’t be purely subjective—if that were the case, then we’d be infallible guides as to what constitutes a meaningful life. However, it is plausible to think that we’re sometimes mistaken about what would constitute a meaningful life, and thus we need to acknowledge a possible gap between what one takes to constitute a meaningful life and what in fact constitutes a meaningful life. I then argued that, in order to offer a cogent version of the Meaningful Life Argument, one needs to provide a basis for thinking that one’s stated criteria for the meaningfulness of life are accurate.

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<sup>2</sup> Kraay and Dragos (2013) note that pro-theism and anti-theism can be subdivided further to account for the scope of those affected by the value God’s existence adds to a world, and the scope of goods God’s existence would affect in a world.

<sup>3</sup> Loughheed (2017).

<sup>4</sup> Penner (2015).

<sup>5</sup> Nagel (2001); Kahane (2011).

<sup>6</sup> Penner (2015), 327.

Second, I looked at some candidate properties for the meaningfulness of life that would be precluded by God's existence, including autonomy, independence, understanding, and privacy. I argued that these are not good candidates for the proponent of the Meaningful Life Argument, because God's existence only precludes experiencing them in an ultimate or total sense; even if there is a God, one is still able to experience a high degree of autonomy, independence, understanding, and privacy.

Lougheed agrees that my objections to the Meaningful Life Argument are sufficient for defeating that argument as the premises are formulated to reflect a subject's fallible, subjective judgements about the meaningfulness of life. However, in response, Lougheed offers the 'Objective Meaningful Life Argument,' which he thinks is able to avoid the objections I raised against the subjective version. After defining the set '*O*s' as "the set of objective moral goods such that for every agent *S* pursuing or obtaining the goods in *O*s is necessary for *S* to have a meaningful life,"<sup>7</sup> Lougheed presents the 'Objective Meaningful Life Argument':

6. If God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining some of the goods in *O*s, then God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining a meaningful life.<sup>8</sup>
7. If God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining a meaningful life, then it's rational for *S* to prefer that God doesn't exist.<sup>9</sup>
8. So, if God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining some of the goods in *O*s, then it's rational for *S* to prefer that God doesn't exist.
9. God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining some of the goods in *O*s.
10. Thus, it's rational for *S* to prefer that God doesn't exist.<sup>10</sup>

Here are three observations on Lougheed's argument—two relatively minor and one that will turn out to have significant consequences in the next section where I'll raise some objections to two of Lougheed's premises.

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<sup>7</sup> Lougheed (2017), 344.

<sup>8</sup> The numbering of the premises and conclusion of this argument follows the numbering in Lougheed's article.

<sup>9</sup> The axiology of theism debate was originally introduced as concerning whether God's existence would make things better or worse, but notice that both mine and Lougheed's arguments discuss whether it's rational to prefer that God does or does not exist (my thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out). This is because, if one thinks God's existence will make things worse, it's rational to prefer that God doesn't exist.

<sup>10</sup> Lougheed (2017), 344-345.

First, note that the way *O<sub>s</sub>* is formulated, it's intended to capture properties that are both objective criteria for the meaningfulness of life, and universal in scope—universal in that they define criteria for the meaningfulness of life for *every agent*. As a consequence, according to Loughheed's specification, there are no *x* and *y* such that (i) *x* is an agent, (ii) *y* is a member of *O<sub>s</sub>*, (iii) *x* is not pursuing or obtaining *y*, and (iv) *x* is able to have a meaningful life. The result is that the scope of the personal anti-theism argued for in the conclusion is also universal to all agents. I merely observe here that one could restrict the scope of *O<sub>s</sub>* to the 'set of objective moral goods such that *for some agent S* pursuing or obtaining the goods in *O<sub>s</sub>* is necessary for *S* to have a meaningful life.' That eases the burden of having to identify criteria for a meaningful life that need to apply to all agents at all times and places. And, second, note also that *O<sub>s</sub>* must be a non-empty set.

Third, regardless of how one understands the sense of rationality picked out in the premises, it seems that (7) requires an additional clause specifying either a subject's awareness of the criteria that are in *O<sub>s</sub>* (to range over internal rationality), or some kind of reliability or proper functionalist condition being satisfied (to range over external rationality), as well as a no-defeater condition (to guard against the sense of irrationality that arises from an incoherent noetic structure). (7) as stated is insufficient for the following reason. For ease of analysis, suppose that *O<sub>s</sub>* only has one member: the moral property *P*. Suppose also that some agent *S* doesn't think that *P* is a member of *O<sub>s</sub>*. Suppose also that God's existence prevents *S* from pursuing or obtaining *P* and that *S* knows this to be the case. Now, suppose finally that *S* thinks that *O<sub>s</sub>* has as its only member the moral property *Q*, and moreover, *S* knows that God's existence would *not* prevent her from pursuing or obtaining *Q*.<sup>11</sup> We then have a case where the antecedent of (7) is satisfied, for God's existence would in fact prevent *S* from pursuing or obtaining a meaningful life. However, there is a plausible sense of internal rationality according to which it is irrational for *S* to prefer that God doesn't exist, given that, on her own understanding of what constitutes a meaningful life, God's existence is irrelevant to her ability to pursue or obtain meaningfulness. This can be fixed, however, by replacing 7 with the following:

7\* If God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining a meaningful life, then it's rational for *S* to prefer that God doesn't exist provided that (a) *S* has correctly identified the members of *O<sub>s</sub>*, and (b) *S* has no defeater for her judgement about what moral goods constitute the members of *O<sub>s</sub>*.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> In order to avoid complications that arise from epistemic closure principles, assume also that *Q* does not entail *P*, and that *S* knows this.

<sup>12</sup> With suitable modifications to the remaining premises in order to account for any modifications to (7).

7\* is able to handle the previous counterexample, for *S* in that case fails to satisfy the condition (a) that specifies that *S* has correctly identified the members of *O*s.

However, 7\* still isn't quite right, for we can modify the previous counterexample in the following way. Again, for ease of analysis, suppose that *O*s only has one member: the moral property *P*. Suppose also that conditions (a) and (b) are satisfied. That is, *S* has correctly identified that *P* is the sole member of *O*s and she has no defeater for that judgement. But suppose also that, in addition to it being the case that God's existence would preclude *S* from pursuing or obtaining *P*, other factors independent of God's existence make it the case that *S* is unable to rationally pursue or obtain *P*—perhaps some limiting factors in *S*'s cognitive architecture, or some other relevant features of the world. In that case, we have a scenario in which *S*'s inability to rationally pursue or obtain *P* is overdetermined, for she's unable to achieve it whether or not God exists. And if God's existence is irrelevant to *S*'s ability to achieve a meaningful life, then *S*'s inability to achieve a meaningful life doesn't provide justification for anti-theism. Thus, we can amend 7\* to the following 7\*\*:

7\*\* If God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining a meaningful life, then it's rational for *S* to prefer that God doesn't exist provided that (a) *S* has correctly identified the members of *O*s, (b) *S* has no defeater for her judgement about what moral goods constitute the members of *O*s, and (c) *S* could pursue or obtain the members of *O*s if God did not exist.

While 7\*\* is able to handle the amended counterexample, we'll see that qualifying it in this way has consequences for the plausibility of the Objective Meaningful Life Argument.

### III. Objections to the Objective Meaningful Life Argument

#### *1. Overdetermined Breaches of Complete Independence and Autonomy*

Lougheed's main candidates for members in *O*s are the moral goods of independence, autonomy, and privacy. It's crucial for his argument that these moral goods, as members of *O*s, be conceived of in an unfettered, unconstrained, and absolute maximal way—he calls these “complete goods”<sup>13</sup>; if it were not so, then premise (9) of the Objective Meaningful Life Argument wouldn't be true. According to (9), God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining some of the goods in the *O*s. And, while an agent may experience a measure of independence, autonomy, and privacy even if there is a God, it's true that God's existence prevents these from being experienced in an ultimate sense.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Lougheed (2017), 346-351.

<sup>14</sup> Explaining why this is so is addressed in the sequel.

However, it turns out that, when conceived of in this ultimate, unfettered way, *S*'s inability to rationally pursue or obtain these properties is overdetermined. That's because so defined, *S* can't experience ultimate independence, autonomy, or privacy whether or not God exists. The dilemma for Lougheed is this: either the plausible candidates for membership in the *O*s are conceived of in an unfettered, maximal degree or they are not. If they are, then 7\*\* is false, for condition (c) won't be satisfied (as *S*'s inability to rationally pursue or obtain those meaning giving properties is overdetermined—she can't obtain them regardless of whether God exists). But if they're not considered in a maximal way, then (9) of the argument is false, for God's existence allows for a great deal of independence, autonomy, and even privacy.<sup>15</sup>

Consider *independence* and suppose that there is a God. What type of independence would be precluded in such a scenario? Let *ontological independence* be the type of independence that's achieved if, say, one is able to exist without owing anything, ontologically to another. Well, true, if God exists, then, ultimately, one's existence is a function of some type of creative activity of God. But *S*'s inability to achieve that kind of independence is overdetermined, because assuming *S* is a contingent being, *S* is going to depend in some relevant sense on others for coming into being.

Now, Lougheed does attempt to specify a sense of independence that is precluded by God's existence but not otherwise, and if he's successful, then he has avoided the dilemma outlined above. Here's how he sets out to describe complete independence:

If God exists, then humans have been created by a maximal being and hence there necessarily exists a being superior to them. It is true that everyone is dependent on humans in some way (e.g., we all have biological parents), but this is different from the existence of a maximal being who is literally responsible for the existence of everything in the universe. The constraints that the existence of such a being places on our autonomy and independence in virtue of logical necessity, such as the impossibility of complete knowledge, do not exist if God does not exist. Autonomy and independence are not, then, goods that come in degrees at least when considered this way.<sup>16</sup>

Here are the relevant features of the sort of independence and autonomy Lougheed in the passage above says is precluded on God's existence: if God exists, one is dependent on a maximal being who is ultimately causally responsible for the existence of everything there is, and one is unable to attain complete knowledge. Again, if independence and autonomy require independence whatever or whomever is ultimately causally responsible for the existence of

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<sup>15</sup> An anonymous referee pointed out that this objection is anticipated in Kraay and Dragos (2013), 164-166.

<sup>16</sup> Lougheed (2017), 349.

everything there is, God's existence precludes that sort of independence. Moreover, if autonomy requires omniscience (what else could "complete knowledge" mean?), then God's existence would preclude that sort of autonomy.

However, are those features of independence and autonomy possible, even if there is no God? Lougheed seems to think so:

Notice too that independence and autonomy will obtain if God does not exist. The question of the existence of the universe needs a different answer if this is the case (though historically some atheists have argued that the universe is eternal), but the answer will not necessary be that it was caused by a maximal being. I suppose if a powerful being created the universe (though not a maximally powerful one), then all of the same questions about whether it is better for that being to exist could be asked in the same way we are asking them about God. Alternatively, if the answer to existence is not supernatural, then it is unclear those same questions need or can be asked. And then humans will have autonomy and independence in a way they otherwise would not.<sup>17</sup>

Lougheed here is claiming that if whatever is the cause or set of causal processes that is responsible for the existence of all there is, is not a supernatural cause/set of causal processes, "then it is unclear those same questions need or can be asked. And then humans will have autonomy and independence in a way they otherwise would not."<sup>18</sup> Lougheed's response here is curious in that it doesn't address the central issue of how, exactly, the non-existence of God would provide the type of complete independence and autonomy precluded by God's existence. In both cases, one 'owes her existence' to factors outside of her own control. That is the relevant feature of independence that is lost in virtue of being a contingent being, and that will be the case whether or not there is a God. Moreover, Lougheed's response fails to address the worry about loss of omniscience if there's a God. Presumably, God as an infinite being would be such that there are facts about God that are inaccessible to finite cognitive agents. But lack of omniscience will obtain regardless of whether God exists, simply in virtue of one's being a finite cognitive agent. So, with respect to independence and autonomy, Lougheed hasn't given a convincing example of features that would be lost on God's existence but obtained if there is no God.

One final type of independence considered by Lougheed we might call '*teleological independence*.' This is the type of independence that allows one to pursue purposes one sets for oneself. Lougheed references the following principle from Thadeus Metz:

*Creation Principle:*      *[I]t is disrespectful to create a person for any purpose other than to pursue its own purposes.*<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Metz (2013), 103.

Lougheed assumes that, if God exists, the Creation Principle is violated, but that doesn't follow. There's no contradiction in thinking that God exists and that persons have as part of their causal power and overall purpose, if any such overall purpose there be, the capacity to pursue their own purposes. This would not entail, however, that any creaturely purpose one sets for oneself is intrinsically good, or that any such subjectively chosen purpose would contribute to a meaningful life.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, it's not the case that God's existence precludes teleological independence.<sup>21</sup>

## 2. *Privacy*

In order for complete privacy to be a moral good that is both precluded by God's existence and such that it can be utilized in the Objective Meaningful Life Argument, it must be the case that complete privacy is possible in a world in which there is no God (otherwise, condition 7\*\* (c) fails to be satisfied). Is complete privacy possible in a world in which there is no God? And would God's violating complete privacy be a good reason to think that some member of the *Os* has been precluded? I think the answer to both of these questions is no.

First, complete privacy doesn't seem physically possible even if there is no God. Lougheed says he's not going to worry too much about defining privacy,<sup>22</sup> but a little precision will help us see the challenge of maintaining complete privacy even in a Godless world. Suppose complete privacy for *S* meant *for any fact F about S, S is able to choose whether F is disclosed to another agent*. Surely that kind of complete privacy can't be achieved in a Godless world, for from birth to death there are facts about one's existence such that their disclosure to other agents is beyond one's control. Or perhaps we can restrict complete privacy to range over privacy of one's mental states, where complete privacy for *S* is achieved *when there's no mental state m of S such that (a) S does not want m revealed to any other agent, and (b) m is not revealed to any other agent*. Even restricting complete privacy to range only over facts about one's mental states, it is very unlikely that one could exercise such complete and perfect control over the way in which one's mental states are disclosed to others. Indeed, the cognitive process that cognitive scientists dub 'theory of mind' suggests that this would be fighting a seriously uphill battle, as it seems that as cognitive agents it's important to us to attribute mental states to others.<sup>23</sup> We're on the lookout for the

<sup>20</sup> But that's just to repeat a point made earlier in rejecting the original Objective Meaningful Life argument on the basis of fallibility about our ability to determine criteria for life's meaningfulness.

<sup>21</sup> God's existence might entail that some subjectively chosen creaturely purposes are such that, while they may be pursued, they cannot be achieved. But that doesn't violate the Creation Principle.

<sup>22</sup> Footnote 35 in Lougheed (2017), 346.

<sup>23</sup> Goldman (2012).



content of the mental states of others, and we attribute mental states to others as the result of quick and non-inferential cognitive processes. The likelihood that one is not perfectly able to shield the content of one's mental states to others—even mental states we wish to remain hidden—suggests that even the restricted complete mental state privacy can't be achieved in a Godless world.

Moreover, is God's violating the privacy of one's thoughts a good candidate for thinking that some member of the *Os* has been precluded? Some finite, less than perfectly good moral agent having access to my thoughts could plausibly be seen to prevent my ability to achieve or pursue a meaningful life. However, that isn't the case when the agent who knows my thoughts is God, a perfectly good moral agent. Perhaps a logical consequence of God's omniscience is that I lack complete mental state privacy. But assuming that God is perfectly good, then God's having more knowledge about *S*'s mental states than *S* herself isn't a relevant barrier for *S*'s pursuit of a meaningful life.

#### IV. Conclusion

Lougheed's thoughtful paper provides a thorough analysis of several issues related to the axiology of theism. However, the Objective Meaningful Life Argument fares no better than its more subjective ancestor. If it is the case that God's existence would make things worse, these arguments do not demonstrate that putative fact, and thus fail to support the rationality of preferring that God does not exist.

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