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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Our lives go better in a world created by God

Brian Ballard

Center for Human Values and Department of Philosophy, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA; Center for Faith and Flourishing, LCC International University, Klaipėda, Lithuania and Christ College, Concordia University Irvine, Irvine, CA, USA
Email: brian.ballard@cui.edu

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Abstract

This article develops a novel argument that God's existence would greatly increase our prospects for meaning in life. The key idea is that if God exists, He stands in certain relations to the world that would confer value upon it. For instance, God would be its creator and sustainer. The world would thus gain value in much the way that relics gain value by their links with historical persons and events. And crucially, as a result of this infusion of value, our lives go better because the things we engage with matter more.

Keywords: axiology of theism; pro-theism; anti-theism; extrinsic final value; meaning in life

Introduction

Imagine some old sketch hangs on your wall. It has been in your family for decades, and though you've always admired the sketch, its origin and authorship remain unknown. One day, your art-historian friend asks about it. He seems mesmerized by the sketch, even troubled by it. And when, after begging you, he takes it to his colleagues and conducts his analysis, he returns with the news. This sketch, this anonymous ornament which had floated from person to person for so many years unrecognized, turns out to be, beyond dispute, a lost page from the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci.

The story is far-fetched, of course. But if it were true, how would this news affect your attitude towards the sketch? One answer seems pretty likely: You would value it more. Even setting aside dreams of riches to be made at auction, to discover who made this sketch and where it comes from is to be in awe of it. It is to appreciate the sketch in an altogether new way. However much you valued the sketch before, you value it now to far greater depths.

What's more, this is not just some psychological fact about you. You are *right* to value it more, given this news from your friend. The sketch really is precious on account of the one who made it. Someone who thought its authorship at the hands of Leonardo added nothing to its value would baffle us.

And what's more still, while the sketch being made by Leonardo adds to its value a great deal, *it also makes your life go better*. It would be meaningful not only to make such a discovery, but also to own a relic as precious as that; to have such a thing in one's life to admire and share with loved ones.

With this example in mind, consider how theists understand the relation between God and world. For one, they think God created the world. The world is, in a perfectly real sense, God's artifact. And in light of this, the world and the sketch on your wall have something important in common. Both are works of great and illustrious artists. Of course, God would be incomparably greater than da Vinci, and greater for incomparable reasons. But this difference does not diminish but rather intensifies the point of the analogy: On account of the greatness of the artist, the work becomes all the worthier. Thus, finding out the world was made by God should elevate our judgement of its value. For it would mean that every wild and wonderful thing around you would be the work of a Great Artist. And you could lift a stone from the earth and say, 'Here is something made by God'.

As with Leonardo authoring the sketch, God creating the world would not only add to its value. It would also make our lives go better. It would do so by surrounding us with things of greater value with which we can engage. Hiking the range is more worthwhile if these are God's mountains. Smelling the roses is more worthwhile if they are God's roses.

For all the complications it raises, I think this line of thought points to a way in which God's existence would make a difference to the value of things, and to our lives. There seems to be an argument here that if God exists, the world is a thing of greater value, and we are better positioned to flourish in it. The aim of this article is to bring this argument to maturity.

This argument has relevance for two debates where value theory meets the philosophy of religion. The first debate is about how the existence of God bears on life's meaning.[1] In this essay, I point to one way in which God's existence would make life more meaningful. That's at least a practical advantage of theism worth noting. Potentially, it's also a reason for *hoping* God exists.[2]

A second and overlapping debate is over the so-called axiology of theism. In this recently burgeoning field, the main question is not whether God exists, but whether God's existence is preferable to His non-existence. And the two main positions here are pro-theism, which affirms that God's existence is preferable, and anti-theism, which claims the reverse.[3]

To be more exact, two distinctions need to be appreciated in staking out an anti-theist or a pro-theist position. The first is between *narrow* and *wide* versions of these views. So, consider these pro-theist positions:

> *Narrow pro-theism*. Compared to his non-existence, God's existence is preferable in at least one important respect.

> *Wide pro-theism*. Compared to his non-existence, God's existence is preferable all things considered.

And of course, analogous versions of anti-theism can also be formulated.

The second distinction is between *personal* and *impersonal* versions of these views. So consider again how this would look in the case of pro-theism:

> *Personal pro-theism*. Compared to his non-existence, God's existence is preferable for us (or for some subset of people).

> *Impersonal pro-theism*. Compared to his non-existence, God's existence is preferable full-stop.

And again, analogous versions of anti-theism can also be formulated.

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These distinctions cross-cut. So one can be a narrow personal pro-theist, a broad personal pro-theist, and so on. And note as well that, on the face of it, these axiological positions are logically independent from whether God actually exists. So, initially at least, it seems one can be an atheistic pro-theist, or a theistic anti-theist.[4]

With these distinctions in mind, in this essay I am arguing for both *impersonal* and *personal* pro-theism, both in their narrow varieties.

To begin, however, we need to bring into focus the kind of value at play in the example of Leonardo's sketch, a kind of value which, following Nicholas Wolterstorff, I call *bestowed worth*.[5]

Bestowed worth

The sketch by Leonardo exemplifies a kind of value that can be seen in many other cases, even ones where creative production is not involved. The pattern is easy enough to discern, and has been much discussed in recent value theory.[6]

Consider the pen Lincoln used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation, to mention a famous example.[7] Such a pen would obviously be precious in a way that other pens in Lincoln's drawer would not be. But it is precious because of the role it played in history, not because of who created it. So the phenomenon before us is not merely that of artifacts gaining value by the one who made them. A gift from the Queen, the desk of Samuel Johnson, a home run hit by a legendary batter – all of these objects gain value as ends more generally by their relations to things outside of them. This value I am calling *bestowed worth*.

We can analyse the concept of bestowed worth as follows:

> *Bestowed worth*. F has bestowed worth when and only when F acquires final value by its relation to G – typically, some person, period, or event – through which that acquired value is derived from G's own axiological status.[8]

This notion must be paired with that of a *worth-bestowing relation:*

> *Worth-bestowing relation*. F's relation to G is worth-bestowing *if and only if* in virtue of F's relation to G, F has bestowed worth derived from G.

These concepts are defined interchangeably. A worth-bestowing relation is just the kind of relation that furnishes bestowed worth.

One thing in need of elaborating is the notion of value being *derived*. Consider objects that gain final value by their rarity. In some sense, their final value is gained by their relation to other things of value. But their final value is not *derived* from the value of these other things. And that's the key difference between rarity-based value and bestowed worth. To see this, consider the mirror image of bestowed worth, where a thing is *tarnished* by association. If Hitler had painted a masterpiece, you would not wish to hang it in your living room. And a knife used in a string of grisly murders is not one you would chop tomatoes with. That is not mere superstition: Such a knife really would have a sort of awful significance, and someone who surreptitiously prepared food with it, then watched you enjoy it, would be guilty of more than a prank.[9] But that, as I said, is the mirror image. *Positive* worth is bestowed when the relevant relation obtains to some period, event, and so forth, *with its own positive value*. And the worth bestowed is on some level a function of this value. Johnson's desk is one thing. But *Shakespeare's*? The greater the author, it seems, the greater the worth bestowed upon the desk.[10] Final value seems to flow, as it were, from the one to the other. Scarcity alone is not doing the work here: There is a *source* of value.

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But the notion of *final* value also needs some elaborating. By this, I mean to invoke a familiar contrast with instrumental value. So friendship has final value because it is worth having even if it never proves useful. On the other hand, friendship often does prove useful, and so friendship has instrumental value as well.

It seems to me the desk owned by Johnson, like the sketch made by da Vinci, gains in final value, not just instrumental value. We do not merely want to *do* things with these objects. But if a skeptic wants to explain the value of such objects as merely instrumental, what can we say? One response would be to think about replicas. *Imagine a perfect clone of Johnson's desk, if I may shift to that example*. Compared to the real thing, the clone would have little value. And yet, the clone would possess much of the same *instrumental* value as the original. So if Johnson's desk merely has instrumental value on account of its relation to the author, the question is, instrumental for what? What purpose could Johnson's desk serve that a perfect copy could not? This turns out to be hard to answer. And so it looks unlikely that the value of such historical objects can be explained entirely as instrumental.

What the skeptic would need to locate is a purpose which only authentic relics can serve, one which cannot, or not as effectively, be carried out by replicas. What might this be? The most promising answer is that *the authentic relic can facilitate touch by proxy*.[11] One thing we might want from Johnson's desk is a sort of contact with the man which the desk facilitates. My hand pressed to the desk, I am touching what Johnson touched, the daily place of his labours. And it is intelligible that an admirer of Johnson might desire such contact with him, indirect as it may be. And the desk can facilitate this only on account of its special history with the man, a history precisely lacking in replicas. So perhaps the value of authentic relics can be explained as entirely instrumental after all.

Not so. Putting us in touch with Johnson does not exhaust the value had by the authentic desk. For one thing, we can imagine someone who cares nothing for being in contact with Johnson but who still values his desk on account of its history with him. Such a frame of mind is wholly intelligible, even reasonable.[12] Perhaps more decisively, authentic relics have their special value even when we are already in full contact with the relevant person. Consider the scribbles my toddler made on a sheet of paper now hanging on the fridge. These scribbles allegedly depict a mermaid (a case of depiction without resemblance, I assure you). I value this work of art simply because my daughter made it. And that's not about wanting *contact* with her, for I have plenty of that. I see her everyday!

So the value had by relics like Johnson's desk is not wholly instrumental. More plausibly such relics are valuable as ends.

Still, there's a further source of resistance worth addressing here. It has to do with the *bearers* of value. As I've defined the notion, bestowed worth can be realized only if objects, concrete particulars, can bear final value. But some value theorists deny this, claiming instead that states of affairs, or states of objects, are all that can bear final value.[13] So, Johnson's desk isn't finally valuable; rather, *that such a desk exists* is finally valuable. Or, perhaps, *the desk having been owned by Johnson* is finally valuable. What shall I say to value theorists who think this way? I believe, in fact, I can bring them on board. Although I speak freely of concrete particulars bearing final value, everything I say can be said differently to accommodate the states-only theory. For, even on the states-only theory, bestowed worth is still an interesting phenomenon. It just has to be described differently. For instance, perhaps we should say that some objects, in virtue of certain relational properties they have, are value-making parts of states of affairs (in the jargon, these objects would have 'contributory value'). So we might say that, because the desk was owned by Johnson, it is a value-making part of the state of affairs in which such a desk exists. And if that's how we see it, the argument for pro-theism advanced in this article should be no less persuasive. God creating the world would still generate final value. It's just that the final value would not be had by concrete bits of the world. We shall have to say instead that *the existence of a*

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God-created world is finally valuable. Or that *the world having been made by God* is finally valuable. And that's still final value added by God's existence, value that would seem to enrich our lives. So we can accommodate the states-only theorist here, and this should be kept in mind, even as I continue to speak as if concrete particulars really are the bearers final value.

We could ask a lot more about bestowed worth. But, substantively speaking, we have what we need to begin our case for pro-theism. And what we need are just these claims: (a) bestowed worth is a significant type of final value evident in certain examples; (b) certain relations reliably produce bestowed worth; and (c) bestowed worth partly depends on the value of what is related. Give me these three, and I will give you pro-theism.

Five worth-bestowing relations between God and world

Leonardo's having made the sketch confers great value upon it. Plausibly, God's having made the world would do the same both for the world as a whole and for the objects that compose it. But I do not think *making* is the only worth-bestowing relation God bears to the world. Indeed, my aim at present is to articulate *five* such worth-bestowing relations.[14] Now, I think each one of these relations is individually sufficient for bestowing worth upon the world. However, my case for pro-theism does not require this. It only requires that they are *jointly* sufficient. And that is what I will defend. Taken together, these five relations between God and world infuse the world with value. Let us lay them out one by one.

#1. *Making*. As we've already emphasized, God makes the universe and its furniture. And while not every theologian affirms creation ex nihilo, certainly it is the received view in Abrahamic tradition, and common cause for praising God. Glory be to God for dappled things, Hopkins announces. But I am suggesting we invert the formula: Glory be to dappled things for God. For *making* is surely a worth-bestowing relation. Imagine two rocking chairs identical in their intrinsic properties. But one was made by George Washington, or Harriet Tubman, or whatever eminent person you admire and can imagine making a rocking chair. *That* rocking chair is obviously more valuable. And the implication is clear. For theists, God made the universe. He made the earth. He made the Grand Canyon, even me and you.

#2. *Sustaining*. God sustains the world in existence. Sometimes this is conveyed in images that may seem quaint to modern readers. Christ says that God feeds the birds and clothes the lilies of the field.[15] But the idea is an important one. God didn't just make the world and leave it like some forgotten thing it in the attic. He is actively involved in sustaining it, renewing every atom every moment. Aquinas puts it like this: 'God is in all things; not, indeed, as part of their essence, nor as an accident, but as an agent is present to that upon which it works.'[16] Or, as St. Paul says, 'He upholds all things by the word of His power.'[17] And this, too, is a worth-bestowing relation. If your grandfather maintained some old farm all his life, it would lend, for you, a certain added value to that farm. This would be so even if your grandfather didn't 'create' the farm, that is, didn't build it from the ground up but rather bought it, say. So this is a worth-bestowing relation distinct from that of making.[18]

#3. *Owning*. God owns the universe and its furniture. 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof', the Psalmist tells us. One may wonder, of course, if this language is only anthropomorphic. Can God really *own* things? I reply that God's owning things is no more 'anthropomorphic' – in whatever sense that's supposed to be objectionable – than His making, sustaining, loving, blessing, punishing, and forgiving. God is a *Person*, after all, and these are things persons can do.[19] And like making and sustaining, owning is a worth-bestowing relation. Of two identical rocking chairs, if the second were owned by George Washington, or Harriet Tubman, or whomever you need to insert, it would thereby gain in value. Indeed,

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the worth-bestowing power of ownership is a fact the bereaved are well acquainted with. Just think of Harry Potter finding his father's invisibility cloak: 'His father's … this had been his father's. He let the material flow over his hands, smoother than silk, light as air.'[20] So it is with the theist, say, when the ocean waves wash over him: 'These are my Father's waves.'

#4. *Expressing*. The world, being God's handiwork, expresses the divine personality. The decision to create was uncompelled; it thus reflects God's values, His desires, His plans. Every acorn was once a thought cherished in the mind of God. That is what you are holding when you hold an acorn. The thoughts of God are falling from the oak tree. Indeed, this notion of God – as creative artist or craftsman – is captured by a raft of analogies in the Bible. God is the potter and we are the clay.[21] God knits us together in the womb.[22] God is an architect laying the foundations of the earth.[23] God has begun a good work in us and will bring it to perfection.[24] And that's just the Bible. Look to Christian tradition, to someone like Tolkien, who thought of man as 'sub-Creator' and God as a sort of ultimate story teller whom we mimic in our myth-making.[25] In short, as Sir Thomas Browne put it, 'all things are artificial; for nature is the Art of God'.[26] As such, nature expresses His mind, and this, too, is worth-bestowing. One thrilling thing about going to a museum and gazing at a pottery shard, is the personality expressed in the artifact. One imagines the mind that made it. One sees it as the product of a certain sensibility, both alien and relatable. In such moments we are valuing the shard as an expression of that other mind, and if God made the world, we may value it in just this way. The world is God's pottery shard.

#5. *Valuing*. God values His creation. It is one of the first things we learn in the Bible, that what God made He saw as good, then saw as very good. And in the final chapters of Job, this gets a refrain. Speaking to Job from the whirlwind, God offers a catalogue of wild creatures and wild places that He has made simply for the joy of it, not because any human being will find them of particular use. This at once displaces the notion that the world exists for humans only, and reinforces the notion that God appreciates nature for her own sake. Now, if you take the strong view that things only have value because God values them, you face the pointy horn of the Euthyphro dilemma. Is God's valuing the behemoth of Job entirely arbitrary? But I don't have to answer this question, because I am granting that things have value apart from God, and that God is *responding* to their value in valuing them. So my point here is that, in valuing them, He is also *adding* value to them. Just think of the love a child has for her raggedy stuffed animal. The thing may have little intrinsic value. It may even be quite disgusting. But if it gets lost, her father will deploy the troops to find it. This is not only because he wants to prevent his child from suffering: *the thing itself has become valuable as a result of its being valued by his child.* And so it is with God. He Himself being supremely valuable, what He values – so, every single thing of value – gains accordingly.[27] And if you aren't convinced by this, the next time you see a sparrow in your path, try out the thought, 'There is something precious to God.'

We have before us five worth-bestowing relations God bears to the universe, according to the major monotheisms. Taken together, these relations seem to me to infuse the world with a great deal of value. They furnish a powerful argument for pro-theism, in both its personal and impersonal varieties. In what remains, I wish to make clear how this argument might proceed, grappling with the main objections along the way.

Impersonal pro-theism

By now, it is easy enough to see how the argument for narrow impersonal pro-theism will go. The engine of my argument is the thought that God's existence would generate bestowed worth on a massive scale. Now, for this to be true, God must bear some

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worth-bestowing relation or other to His creation. And that's just what I've argued so far. In fact, I have enumerated five such relations. Making, sustaining, owning, and so on – these relations are reliably worth-bestowing, as we see in ordinary cases, as long as one other condition is met: The 'bestower', the relatum that bestows the worth, must itself be something, or someone, of great goodness. And in the case of God, surely we have this. For God would be unsurpassably great.[28] And the magnitude of His greatness is relevant, because the worth bestowed is partly a function of this, as we have seen.

Does this ennoble *every* good? It does, for these divine worth-bestowing relations apply systemically. If God exists, then He *created, sustains, owns, values*, and *expresses his mind in*, every single thing of value. Thus, in virtue of these five relations, a value intensifier applies across the board. And a huge amount of final value is introduced which is absent in a world without God.

And that is worth emphasizing. The bestowed worth I have described *could not possibly* be had without God. This addresses a recent anti-theist strategy employed by Guy Kahane. Kahane argues that if we move away from atheist worlds resembling our own, and consider the full range of possible atheist worlds, then we see that the best atheist worlds are better than the best theist worlds.[29] His argument is that there are downsides intrinsic to God's existence, whereas the goods pro-theists appeal to – eternal bliss, say, or cosmic justice – do not strictly require God's existence at all. However, my argument interrupts Kahane precisely at this point. For I have identified worth-bestowing relations which only a God could stand in, and only a personal God at that, relations such as making and valuing. Of course, there are worlds where some lesser deity stands in these relations, rather than the perfect being of traditional theism. But in such worlds, less worth will be bestowed, since the worth bestowed is partly a function of the character of the relatum. If a perfect God exists, then, an *amount* of worth is bestowed which could not be otherwise. So there is at least one significant sort of value unobtainable in *any* atheist world. The version of impersonal pro-theism I defend is thus, we might say, *modally fortified*. It is immune to capture in possible atheist worlds.

That's the argument for narrow impersonal pro-theism. Plenty of objections remain, however, and in the next section, I shall consider the most pressing of these.

Some objections

The argument I've just offered raises a number of interesting objections. I cannot consider every one of them, but I can at least address the most urgent.

For starters, I have said that God bears worth-bestowing relations to every good thing, relations like that of *sustaining*. But one might wonder if I have overplayed my hand. After all, even the bad stuff is sustained by God. Does this make the bad stuff better somehow? Cancerous tissue is sustained by God.[30] Should we regard it as precious on that account? Surely not, and that's due to a general feature of bestowed worth: whether a given relation bestows worth depends on *both* its relata. A bad thing doesn't suddenly become good just because a good person sustains it. If your dear old granny keeps a vicious rottweiler, that doesn't compel you to love the dog, even if you love your granny.

One might take this worry in the other direction. Perhaps God's relations to the world *make the bad stuff worse*. A fire is one thing. Arson is another. All else being equal, a bad that originates in an agent's will seems worse than a bad that comes about by chance. And if that's right, then even if God's relations to the world make the good things better, it isn't clear there's a net gain, if they also make the bad things worse.[31]

The success of this objection depends on just what relation God stands in to the evils that occur. And the relation that makes things hardest for my case, I think, is not God's *allowing* evils but His *actively sustaining* them. The venom in the veins, the falling napalm, the water

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in the lungs of the drowning man – these things exist only because God is right now willing their molecules into being. This simply follows from the doctrine of God as sustainer. Now, let us grant for the moment that this does not mean God is *inflicting* the bad stuff upon us, that it is God who burns and cheats and slashes. Still, even if an agent doesn't inflict an evil, isn't the evil worse if an agent is actively involved in maintaining it?

The answer depends on who the agent is and why he is doing it. And if God exists, He is a morally perfect agent, with morally sufficient reasons for sustaining the world as we know it, napalm and all. If you think He could have no morally sufficient reason for sustaining the napalm in existence, then you simply think God does not exist. But our topic is not whether God exists but what would follow axiologically if He did. And it is hard to see why a morally perfect agent, with morally sufficient reasons for sustaining the bad, would thereby make the bad any worse. If anything, it would make the bad less bad – or at least, more tolerable for us – because the bad would occur for good reason.[32]

Consider a worry arising from a different direction. Earlier I quoted Sir Thomas Browne approvingly: 'all things are artificial; for nature is the Art of God'. But one might find something disturbing about this. We are in awe of the Grand Canyon. But imagine finding out that, in fact, the Grand Canyon is a giant sculpture made by artisans in ages long vanished. Would this change our estimate of its overall value? One struggles to know what to say here. But certainly, there is a legitimate concern about 'faking nature', a concern that reflects our sense of the value of environments shaped by purely natural processes.[33] Well, if God exists, is all nature faked? Is every tree in the Taiga Forest a piece of landscaping? One could understandably find the thought unsettling. There is something beautiful about the depths of geological time and the complex interactions of natural forces that have shaped such wild places.[34]

This worry, however, rests on a caricature of God's creativity, one that I fear I have tempted. The theist need not say that God *carved* the Grand Canyon, or that He *planted* the Taiga Forest. The theist can allow that God permits natural forces to run wild in His creation. That is compatible with there being a perfectly good – and worth-bestowing – sense in which God makes, sustains, owns, values, and expresses His mind in, every level of the natural order. Certainly, this is affirmed in many theistic traditions. Here, for instance, is how the Westminster Confession puts it: 'God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby … the liberty or contingency of second causes [is not] taken away, but rather established' (Chapter 3). Someone who thinks that, if God is the author of the natural order, then all nature is faked, needs to show that what the Westminster Confession is saying here, and what so many in the Christian tradition have said, is indefensible.

Finally, another objection that often gets raised here has to do with rarity. Earlier, I used the example of Samuel Johnson's desk. This desk has enormous value because it belonged to Johnson. Well, what if Johnson owned a freakishly large number of desks? Say the world is just flooded with Johnson desks. Would the desk be so valuable then? Surely not. But now we are imagining that God stands in worth-bestowing relations *to every good thing*. Take God's ownership of the world. Throw a stick and you'll hit something owned by God. And the stick is also owned by God. So, perhaps God's existence doesn't add much value after all.

But this objection blurs a distinction. The rarity of an object is one factor adding to its overall value (at least in some cases). But bestowed worth is another factor independent of rarity. So, if Johnson desks were commonplaces, then perhaps each desk is less valuable (unless one of them stands out in some way, say, as being his favourite). But each desk would still have bestowed worth: A desk owned by Johnson would still be more valuable than an exact replica of the same desk fresh from the factory. Bestowed worth is still a difference-maker, then, even when the type of object is in abundance. So even if objects

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made, sustained, and owned by God are utterly abundant – indeed, are the set of all objects that exist – they still gain in value by their relations to God. God's relation to the world is still a difference-maker.

Furthermore, I should note that it can be entirely reasonable to value a particular something even when members of its kind are in abundance. If you come upon a great valley filled with California wild poppies, you might reasonably resist the urge to pick one. You might find each poppy precious in itself and for its own sake. And your valuing the individual poppy rationally survives the thought that these flowers grow in abundance here. Indeed, the abundance can be its own source of value. To step back from the one poppy and behold the whole shining valley of wild flowers is to be more, not less, alive to the wonder of it. In the same way, we may picture the theist who kneels before the poppy and says, 'here is God's flower'; and when he rises and surveys the hills where scores of the same poppies bloom, he says, 'And all of this! All of this, too, is God's!', and he says it with no less wonder.

There may, of course, be other objections against the argument from bestowed worth to impersonal pro-theism. But these seem to me the most pressing objections, and to my mind, none of them succeed.

Personal pro-theism

We've seen that God's worth-bestowing relations to the world furnish support for impersonal pro-theism. They enhance the final value of the world and of the things in it. But what about *personal* pro-theism? Is this infusion of bestowed worth good *for us*? Does it make our lives go better in some way? I believe the answer is Yes. And in the little space that remains, while I cannot develop my argument with the care it needs, I shall at least sketch a plausible way forward.

The best way to get from here to personal pro-theism is to think about what it means for us to live in a world enriched with significance; to be surrounded by things of enhanced value. So far, I have focused on natural objects, on flowers and sparrows and oak trees. So let's see the basic point in terms of these things first, then work our way out. And the basic point is that, if these things are more valuable, then our lives go better by their inclusion, through our engagement with them.[35]

Let's say I grow orchids in my yard. This activity is worthwhile, first and foremost, because of something about the orchids themselves. They are beautiful and interesting flowers, and so they are finally valuable. Thus, in growing these orchids, I am both nurturing and appreciating final value. And this makes my life go better, because it makes me (appropriately) happy. It gives me something to delight in. Happiness aside, moreover, it also makes my life more meaningful by connecting me with things of value.

Now, my assumption here is that happiness and meaning come apart.[36] Watching *Seinfeld* with a cold beer is about happiness, not meaning. Suffering for the cause is about meaning, not happiness. These are distinct dimensions of the good life. And the bestowed worth God introduces to the world would enhance both. It would add to happiness by giving us more to appreciate. And it would add to meaning by giving us more value to connect with.

So think again of my orchids. The happiness and the meaning I acquire from these flowers is partly a function of their final value. So if they have more final value, I gain even more meaning, and a warrant for even more happiness or for an even deeper enjoyment of these flowers and my role in their fragile lives. And more final value is precisely what they have, if God exists and bears these various worth-bestowing relations to the world and its furniture. If I inhabit God's world, then in growing orchids I am bringing forth from the soil something God Himself created; something God sustains even as I sustain them with my watering can; something belonging to God which He has, it seems, lent to me for

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a time; something expressing the once secret thoughts of Providence; something in the enjoyment of which I share in the joys of God. And this would seem to make the orchids more significant. And it would render more meaningful my engagement with them.

But growing orchids is not only worthwhile because of the orchids themselves. The activity also exercises and refines valuable capacities of my own, my capacities for planning, for thinking, for labouring, for loving, for sticking with it, for improvising, for following curiosity where it leads. These capacities are themselves finally valuable. And that's why exercising and refining them adds to my life's meaning, and gives me something to delight in. I am delighting in these valuable capacities and the occasion for their exercise which caring for the orchids presents. But if God exists, *these capacities themselves* would be created by God, sustained by God, and so on; and so these capacities, too, would acquire bestowed worth, becoming more valuable as a result. And that means my exercising and refining these capacities would be all the more worthwhile and would thus make my life go even better.

Growing the orchids is also worthwhile because these flowers bring joy to my friends and family. Since these people matter, it is intrinsically good to bring them joy, that is, to provide fitting occasions for their enjoyment. But if God exists, He also created and sustains my friends and family. And though it is perhaps not correct to say that God owns them – can any person really own another person? – God does have a kind of authority over them, perhaps akin to the authority a parent has over a child or a teacher over a student. My loved ones are 'under Him', we might say. They are His as my children are mine. And being under God in this way, not to mention being created and sustained by God, and valued by God, and, in all their peculiarity, expressive of God's mind, my friends and family matter all the more. And so bringing to my loved ones fitting occasions for joy, such as my orchids present, is even more worthwhile, and thus adds even more to my life's meaning and to my well-being more generally.

Indeed, now that we're thinking about friends, we can forget about orchids. For not only did God create my friends. *He created friendship*. That is, as many Abrahamic theists will say, one of God's intentions in making the world was for there to be persons who love each other in friendship. In participating in my friendships, then, I am participating in God's idea. As such, friendship itself would be even more valuable, and so *my* friendships would be even more valuable, and would contribute all the more to my life going well.

As these examples help us see, the worth God bestows upon the world does not just settle on the flora and fauna.[37] Value accrues far more broadly than that. And so, if God exists and bears the worth-bestowing relations I have described, then we inhabit an environment far richer in value, and this makes our lives go better, and adds to our life's meaning, by giving us the chance to connect with things of greater value.

To be clear, I grant that in atheist worlds, we can still connect with value. Apart from God, we can appreciate beauty and sublimity. We can stand in awe of the age of the universe or the complexity of a eukaryotic cell, even if they have no maker, as some atheists have been eager to claim.[38] But the theist can have all this as well. So my point is not that the naturalist's universe gives us nothing to appreciate but that the theist's gives us more, and that by a comfortable margin. In a theist world infused with bestowed worth, there is more value around to engage with, and so our prospects for making meaning by engaging with value rise precipitously.

I said *prospects* for making meaning. Clearly that is not the same as actually making meaning. And the difference matters. The greater value of the things around us, though potentially enriching, is also something we can trip over, like so many bars of gold on the ground. Indeed, some of us – I would say *all* of us at moments in our lives – have failed to connect with value, and have even been culpable in its destruction. Is this not a way in which our lives go *worse* in theist worlds? After all, it seems bad for us to be destroyers of

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ever greater value. This is a source of 'anti-meaning', as some have called it.[39] I want the sketch on my wall to be a da Vinci, but not if I recently destroyed it playing with fire.[40]

This objection points to something important. Whether inhabiting an environment richer in value is good for us depends on how we actually interact with that value. In principle, those who mostly destroy – poachers, slavers, robber barons – lead even worse lives if the value they destroy or otherwise fail to honour turns out to be greater than they even realized.

This threatens to limit our conclusion: Our lives go better in theist worlds, if *our* refers to those of us who live out a pattern of positive engagement with value. And in fact, I think this is the most we can conclude, if we are considering bare theism. But if we are considering an enriched form of theism, one in which God is a *redeemer*, things turn out differently. A redeemer God has the afterlife to work with. He can make this life but the first page in the great story of my redemption. He can take the value I have lost or destroyed and raise it up. He can forgive me, and reconcile me to those I have wronged and have been wronged by. And He can do this with such wisdom and subtlety that my life's narrative, like the cracked vessel restored by the art of Kintsugi, is made all the lovelier for the breakages now veined in gold. And so our lives – the lives of all persons – go better in a world created by God, as long as God is our redeemer, a God prepared to bring good from the ways we fail to honour the world made better by His having made it at all.

This is admittedly so many sketch lines. But the lines suggest a surprising picture. Given the bestowed worth God would introduce to the world, and given the prospects for meaning this creates as well as the risks of anti-meaning, and given the actual pattern of destroying and otherwise failing to appreciate value which many of our lives actually exhibit, we may well have before us an argument for personal *anti*-theism with respect to bare theism, but personal *pro*-theism with respect to an enriched theism in which God acts as a meticulous redeemer in our lives. *That* is the God in whose world our lives go better.

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Notes

1. For a sampling of this debate, see Cottingham (2005); Craig (2008, ch.2); Mawson (2016); May (2015); Metz (2013), Part II; Nozick (1981, 594–619); Seachris (2016); Swinburne (2016); Wielenberg (2005); and Williams (2011, 2020).
2. A reason for hoping God exists – so what? In fact, some argue this bears directly on the rationality of religious commitment, since such commitments seem to involve various conative and evaluative attitudes (see, for instance, Audi 2011, Ballard 2017, and Licon 2021). But the practical advantage here might also be a reason for betting on God's existence in a kind of Pascalian wager, perhaps as suggested in Rota (2016).
3. Important anti-theist arguments can be found in Betenson (2018), Kahane (2011, 2018), Lougheed (2020), Luck and Ellerby (2012), Maitzen (2018), and Wielenberg (2018). Pro-theist arguments can be found in Ballard (2021), Davison (2018), Kraay and Dragos (2013), Lougheed (2018), Penner and Lougheed (2015), and Tooley (2018). See Kraay (2021) for a fine introduction to this burgeoning subfield.
4. But this claim to logical independence is challenged in Ballard (2024), Tooley (2018), and Schellenberg (2018).

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5. Human beings, Wolterstorff (2008) thinks, have bestowed worth in virtue of bearing God's love, and this worth demands respect, a demand enshrined in our notion of human rights. The present article, however, shall say nothing about human rights, let alone Wolterstorff's account of rights. Instead, I seek to carry the notion of bestowed worth beyond its application to human rights to the value of the world around us.
6. See especially, Kagan (1998), Korsgaard (1983), Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (1999), and Tenen (2020).
7. Cf. Kagan (1998). But note the very same pen example and a discussion of the same phenomenon can also be found in Douglass (1994), *Life and Times*, Part 3, Book IX.
8. For value theorists who believe in extrinsic final value, bestowed worth will belong to that category. But bestowed worth should not be equated with extrinsic final value, because, for instance, value based on rarity also seems to belong to that category.
9. Some psychologists, such as Nemeroff and Rozin (1994), assume without argument that this is a sort of illusory magical thinking, to regard a knife used for murder as tarnished, and the food prepared with it as tarnished in kind. To such sceptics I think the proper response is: *bon appétit!*
10. But this may be too simplistic. Suppose the works of Johnson shaped me in my youth but the works of Shakespeare did not. In that case, because of the special role Johnson had in my life, his desk would be valuable *for me* in a way that Shakespeare's desk would not be. Very well, but notice that something about Johnson is still conditioning the value of the desk for me.
11. Cf. Korsmeyer (2019); Matthes (2013).
12. Cf. Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2000), 41.
13. See Lemos (1994) and Zimmerman (2001).
14. Actually, I believe there are a dozen worth-bestowing relations between God and worl. In addition to the five I shall describe – a representative sampling chosen for no particular reason – I would add these seven considerations, every one of which has been dear to theistic tradition, although the last three reflect distinctively Christian teaching: the things of the world (a) are given by God as gifts for our sake; (b) are used by God to communicate important spiritual truths to us, such as truths about His attributes; (c) resemble God, albeit in different ways; (d) are endowed by God with purposes; (e) are redeemed by the sacrifice of the incarnate God; (f) are marked out for future restoration; and (g) belong to a created order that God himself entered when He became incarnate. (Kevin Ryan – who is not a philosopher but a luthier of uncommon philosophical aptitude – pointed out this last relation to me.) I cannot defend or even explain the sense in which (a) through (g) capture additional worth-bestowing relations between God and world. I note them only because it seems to me worth developing an exhaustive catalogue.
15. Matt. 6:26–29.
16. Aquinas (1948), 34.
17. Heb. 1:3. See also van Inwagen (1995) for philosophical account of God's sustaining power.
18. There's an old theological dispute about whether God's sustaining the world is metaphysically distinct from His creating it. Some deny this, and claim these divine actions are metaphysically the same. Every moment God sustains the world, He's really just continuously creating it. And I can grant this. For even if these acts are metaphysically the same, they are different from an axiological point of view. If some great personage makes something, that's one source of value. But his continued involvement in sustaining it is another source of value.
19. Of course, some theologians deny that God is a person, but in the Christian tradition, most will at least say that God has personal characteristics. That aside, there remains a deeply interesting question as to the scope and basis of Gods property rights, a question that is, to my knowledge, totally unexplored today, though historically God's property rights have been assumed in some of the most influential works in political philosophy, notably Locke's *Second Treatise*. Clearly, though, this is not the place to pursue the issue; I only flag it as an area for further investigation.
20. Rowling (1997), 205.
21. Jer. 18:6; Rom. 9:21.
22. Psalm 139:13.
23. Isaiah 48:13; Job 38:4–6; Prov. 8:29; Psalm 104:5.
24. Phil. 1:6.
25. Tolkien (2001).
26. Browne (1968), 22.
27. Another point here is that, if God exists, *all valuable things are responded to appropriately*. And when valuable things are responded to appropriately, this is itself valuable. Likewise for disvalue: It is valuable when injustices are met with anger, when tragedies are met with sorrow, and so on (cf. Hurka 2000; Nozick 1981, 517–522; 1989, ch. 9). Well, if God exists, He would be a perfect valuer. He would respond appropriately to every case, including Himself. And this would be a massive source of value added to the universe. The tragedy of beauty going unappreciated is unwritten from the world.

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28. At least two other arguments for pro-theism spotlight the goodness of God: First, Davison (2018) argues that God Himself would have tremendous final value; and second, Penner and Lougheed (2015) argue that God, being a morally excellent agent, would introduce great value in the ways morally excellent agents generally do when unconstrained. In contrast, I am saying that God, just by making the world, sustaining it, etc., would enhance the world's value.

29. Kahane (2018).

30. One might be tempted to respond that this objection assumes there are *bad kinds* in God's creation, an assumption rejected by many theologians (for instance, Augustine 2001; for discussion, see Ortlund 2020, ch. 4). But this response won't work. Even if cancer is not a bad kind, *getting* cancer is still a bad *event*. And it is an event sustained by God, since He sustains all the physical components of that event. So the objection survives.

31. Thanks to Thaddeus Metz for raising this objection.

32. But I do not assume that, for every bad that occurs, God would have some particular reason for allowing it. In fact, I think this is false. Instead, God has a reason for allowing us to live in a world in which evils occur at random (cf. Van Inwagen 2006). At any rate, I do suspect that we have uncovered here yet a further reason for pro-theism: If God exists, then there is some morally sufficient reason why evils occur. And it seems better for us to live in such a world. In her recent work on the problem of evil, Laura Ekstrom (2021, 210–213), who finds the argument from evil compelling, acknowledges there are certain losses we suffer in abandoning faith. Interestingly, while she includes in her list the loss of that ultimate justice which God would secure in the final things, she does not include a related but more immanent loss, one quite relevant to the problem of evil: without God there is just no way the evils we experience have behind them a morally sufficient reason for their occurrence. A similar point is argued in Kraay and Drago (2013) and Licon (2021), but see Kahane (2021) for a response.

33. Cf. Elliot (1982).

34. On separate occasions, this point was raised to me by Brad Cokelet, Guy Kahane, Asha Lancaster-Thomas, and Myron Penner.

35. Cf. Adams (1999), 93–94; Landau (2017), 19; Metz (2013), 246–247; Nagel (1986), 215; Nozick (1981), 610; Raz (2001), Ch. 4; and Wolf (2010), 32.

36. Cf. Metz (2013), 73–74; Wolf (1997).

37. But make no mistake, the flora and fauna are definitely in view here, and you are right to guess that what I've argued so far suggests a theistic environmental philosophy. It's not something I can develop here, but as a start, I would point to a recent movement of theistic environmental thought, including Berry (2002), Cloutier (2014), Francis (2015), Nash (1991), Northcott (1999), Rolston III (2010), Schaefer (2009), Schaeffer (2011), and Wilkinson (2012). And I would observe that, in many of these theistic philosophies, a notion of bestowed worth like the one I have developed here seems to be at work, albeit inchoately. Of course, a cynic might imagine these theists are merely jumping on the environmental bandwagon after long centuries of their religion teaching the shameless domination of nature, as White (1967) argued so infamously. I would invite these sceptics to reconsider this historical judgement in light of more recent work, especially Cohen (2019) and Sorrell (1988). But, as I say, I cannot develop these points any further at present.

38. See, for example, Dawkins (2000), Dworkin (2013), Kitcher (2014), and Gould (2011).

39. Cf. Campbell and Nyhom (2015).

40. This objection I owe to Terence Cuneo and an anonymous referee who wisely encouraged me to explore it here.

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