

## PERSPECTIVES AND POSITIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay discusses two issues. The first concerns whether the “insider’s” or “outsider’s” perspective is more truth-conducive in the study of religion. I do not attempt to settle this very thorny question: I merely attempt to identify some aspects of what it might mean to be an insider with respect to one kind of investigation – the investigation into whether God exists. The second issue concerns how best to characterize certain philosophical positions on the axiology of ultimate reality. Here I argue that it can be useful to group together certain axiological positions under one heading, while leaving their details open to interpretation. For example, two philosophers might agree that *God’s existence would – or does – make the world far better than it would otherwise be*, even though they have incompatible notions of what constitutes ‘far’ and ‘better’. In my view, it makes sense to call both thinkers *pro-theists*, despite their differences. In discussing these issues, I engage the work of Myron A. Penner and Paul Moser, both of whom published replies to a paper of mine in the most recent issue of the *Toronto Journal of Theology*.<sup>1</sup>

### PERSPECTIVES

The author, professor, and public intellectual Reza Aslan appeared on the Fox television network on July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013, to discuss his latest book, entitled *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (Random House), which has since become a New York Times #1 Bestseller. Aslan self-identifies as a Muslim. His interviewer, religion correspondent Lauren Green, seemed utterly unable to understand why a Muslim would have any interest in authoring a book about Jesus. She also appeared to take the view that Aslan’s faith would inevitably and irredeemably bias any such effort.<sup>2</sup> This view seems worse than facile: a glaring instance of either the *ad hominem* fallacy, or the genetic fallacy, or both. But while it is surely false that being a Muslim automatically precludes an author from producing good scholarship on Jesus, this does not help to sort out whether the “insider’s” perspective or the “outsider’s” is more truth-conducive.

In a recent paper, Myron A. Penner considers this distinction between perspectives, which he introduces as follows: “One has an insider’s perspective to the study of religion when one is an active participant in some relevant sense of the religious outlook under investigation. Conversely, one has an outsider’s perspective to the study of religion when one wouldn’t count herself as an active participant within the religious experience, community, or phenomenon being investigated”.<sup>3</sup> Penner notes that perspective of this sort comes in degrees, and after conceding that these labels are not always “clear, universally applicable, or helpful,” he maintains that “there are clear cases of insider and outsider perspectives, and it is an interesting methodological question whether having an insider’s perspective helps, hinders, or is neutral in the study of religion”.<sup>4</sup>

Penner is right that this is a very interesting methodological question, worthy of further (meta)philosophical analysis. In order to answer it, of course, we must first understand what it

is to have the insider's (or outsider's) perspective. There is presumably a propositional component: one mark of being an insider is believing, or perhaps accepting,<sup>5</sup> certain key propositions shared by the rest of the relevant community. But of course complications immediately arise. It doesn't take much sociology to realize that it is exceedingly difficult to determine what constitutes a community, let alone "the relevant community". And it doesn't take much theology to realize that it is exceedingly difficult to determine which claims really are "key" to a given religious community. So nailing down the propositional aspect of being an insider will be tricky indeed.

In addition to the propositional component, there may also be an affective or attitudinal component to being an insider that bears on the study of religion. Paul Moser, for example, suggests that someone who does not have a certain attitude towards God might literally be incapable of assessing all the evidence that bears on the question of whether this being exists:

In virtue of being worthy of worship and thus morally perfect, the God in question would seek from humans more than their intellectual assent to the proposition that God exists. God would also seek a receptive, agreeable human attitude towards a divine moral character worthy of worship. When people are not yet ready to adopt such an attitude, God could reasonably hide divine evidence from them, so as not to repel them in their responses to God.<sup>6</sup>

If Moser's proposal is right, then one is not truly an insider in this case unless, in addition to believing or accepting the correct propositions, one also exhibits the correct *attitude*. Of course, Moser's proposal is controversial,<sup>7</sup> but accounts like his deserve careful attention as part of the overall project of understanding what it means to have an insider's (or outsider's) perspective.

Moreover, at least in some cases, it may be that a further hallmark of being an insider is taking oneself to have a certain incommunicable insight into the relevant issue(s) that others – notably, outsiders – lack. Peter van Inwagen, for example, considers whether he can be rationally justified in believing certain philosophical positions in the face of the realization that he has *epistemic peers*<sup>8</sup> who believe precisely the denials of these positions. He thinks that he is justified, and he defends this by appeal to a certain philosophical insight that he possesses but just cannot communicate to these peers.<sup>9</sup> Unsurprisingly, this proposal is also controversial. David Christiansen, for example, thinks that van Inwagen isn't entitled to appeal to any incommunicable insight unless he can point to some reason, *independent of the disagreement itself*, for thinking that his peers lack the special insight he has.<sup>10</sup> Still, it may well be that many insiders, consciously or otherwise, think that they have some unique insight into their position that outsiders must lack, and the epistemic credentials of this view warrant further scrutiny.

Suppose that an adequate account of the distinction between insiders and outsiders can be given. The next order of business is to determine which perspective (if any) is more truth-conducive with respect to a certain line of inquiry. Here it is safe to predict that answers will vary. Consider the inquiry into whether God exists. Moser, as we have seen, thinks that outsiders haven't a hope of accessing – and hence assessing – all the relevant evidence. So he presumably believes that the insider's perspective is the most truth-conducive. Peter van Inwagen takes a different view altogether. In the third of his 2003 Gifford Lectures, he claims that a philosophical argument fails when it does not convince members of an ideal neutral audience who have listened to ideal presentations of both the argument itself and criticisms of it.<sup>11</sup> Given the important role that van Inwagen accords to the members of this ideal neutral audience, it seems clear that he thinks that agnostic outsiders are better positioned than theistic insiders to get at the truth.<sup>12</sup> No doubt others would hold that *atheist* outsiders are better poised than both theists and agnostics to evaluate arguments for God's existence, perhaps because they are more strongly motivated to find errors of reasoning. An intriguing distinct position is occupied by Mark Nelson.<sup>13</sup> Nelson thinks that the ideal adjudicators of such arguments are those theists who display great philosophical aptitude, who possess sterling characters, and,

furthermore, who take their belief in God to be *properly basic* – rational even if unsupported by philosophical argument. Only they, Nelson thinks, are capable of being sufficiently *disinterested* in the success of such arguments.<sup>14</sup> These are just four possible positions on the question of whether the insider’s or the outsider’s perspective is more truth-conducive. Surely more could be developed. Space restrictions make it impossible to set out and assess all possible views on this question here, so I will just record my agreement with Penner that this is truly an important issue, especially with respect to the study of religion, and that it deserves further examination.

## POSITIONS

Analytic philosophers love to draw careful distinctions between various possible positions that one might take on a given issue. In the final section of my recent paper, I distinguished various positions about axiology of ultimate reality, and, more specifically, I encouraged philosophers of religion to investigate what difference in value God’s existence would – or does – make in the world.<sup>15</sup> In his recent reply, Paul Moser lodges two complaints about this section. Both will now be discussed in turn.

First, Moser complains that I concentrate on a model of God according to which this being exists *necessarily*.<sup>16</sup> He points out that many theists deny that God exists necessarily, and he notes that ontological arguments designed to establish God’s necessary existence have been widely criticized. Moser is of course right that there are theists who believe that God exists contingently.<sup>17</sup> Moser is also right to say that ontological arguments are very controversial, but it is not clear that this is germane. After all, one might hold that God exists necessarily even while deeming all ontological arguments to be failures.

More importantly, however, Moser is mistaken in thinking that my reference to necessary existence constitutes an “unnecessarily exclusive definitional fiat”.<sup>18</sup> On the contrary, I aimed to use this definition of God only as an example. Indeed, I explicitly stated that: “... while I have here discussed only one model of theism ... I believe that it would be very worthwhile to consider the axiological implications of other conceptions of God, and indeed of other models of ultimate reality”.<sup>19</sup> So Moser’s first criticism misses the mark.<sup>20</sup>

Second, Moser complains about the use of “far” and “better” in the following definitions I offered:

Let’s define *pro-theism* as the view that God’s existence makes (or would make) the world far better than it would otherwise be. *Anti-theism*, then, will be the view that God’s existence makes (or would make) the world far *worse* than it would otherwise be. *Indifferentism* is the view that God’s existence makes (or would make) the world neither far better nor far worse, and *agnosticism* is the view that we should suspend judgment about this axiological issue.<sup>21</sup>

Moser thinks that the use of “far” here is unnecessary. He says that it introduces undesirable vagueness into the these positions, and hence into any attempt to assess them. He also points out that the term “better” is ambiguous between multiple domains of value, and recommends that these definitions be modified to remove such ambiguity. (He presumably thinks likewise about the term “worse”.)

In response, it is worth noting that in the original paper, the quotation displayed above contains a footnote which points out that the terms *pro-theism* and *anti-theism* are due to Guy Kahane, and which directs the interested reader to two detailed discussions of how best to construe these positions, one of which I co-authored.<sup>22</sup> Moser does not engage any of these papers. But let’s set that aside.

It is true that Kahane’s (and my) use of the term “far” serves to narrow the scope of pro-theism and anti-theism, and to widen the scope of *indifferentism*. The terrain of axiological positions could indeed be carved differently, and perhaps Moser is right that it is a bit odd to

classify as an indifferentist someone who thinks that God's existence makes the world better, but not *far* better, than it would otherwise be. But it is not clear that this matters very much. What interests me much more – and what matters much more – is not the exact location of the boundaries between these positions, but rather whether the arguments for and against these positions, however construed, have philosophical merit. The burden lies on the pro-theist to offer cogent reasons for thinking God's existence would or does make things better (or, if she prefers, *far* better). And the same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for the anti-theist, the indifferentist, and the agnostic about this axiological issue. And then it is up to the philosophical community to evaluate whether her arguments are persuasive.

Next, let's turn to Moser's concern about the ambiguity in the term 'better' (and, one presumes, 'worse'). Moser is quite right to point out that this term can refer to many different domains, such as morality, prudence, pleasure, and aesthetics. But this does not itself show that the terms *pro-theism* and *anti-theism* should be narrowed to one or another type of betterness or worseness. On the contrary, it is preferable to leave these disambiguations out of the definitions of these positions, and instead demand that the defenders of either view clearly explain which kind of betterness or worseness they have in mind. Guy Kahane, for example, argues that God's existence would make the world *personally worse* in certain specific respects, for certain people.<sup>23</sup> And Moser himself argues, in the final section of his paper, that the (contingent) existence of a perfectly good and loving God would make the world *morally and spiritually better*. Once such a specific proposal is tabled, the philosophical community can begin to assess its merits.<sup>24</sup> Leaving the positions called 'pro-theism' and 'anti-theism' neutral in this way brings out an important family resemblance between all such proposals.

Consider a political analogy. Let's define a "democrat" to be someone who thinks that a particular society would be (or is) much better off for having adopted democracy. Even if such a person is clear about what she means by "democracy", Moser would presumably object that this definition involves vagueness in its use of "much" and ambiguity in its use of "better". This is true, but it needn't be a problem. This definition can be a useful way to group similar axiological positions under one heading, even though they may well differ on what "better" means and on how much "much" is. Perhaps this will make it impossible to evaluate the merits of "democratism" as a whole, but no matter: what is important is that each democrat clearly spell out what she means when she presents her case, so that the relevant community of inquirers can then evaluate her specific proposal.

## PERSPECTIVES ON AXIOLOGICAL POSITIONS

In closing, I would like to draw together the two topics discussed in this paper in order to chart a course for future research. As I urged above, it is well worth attending to the (meta)philosophical question of whether the "insider's" or "outsider's" perspective is more truth-conducive when inquiring into whether God exists. The three broad positions on the existence of God are, of course, theism, agnosticism, and atheism. Now, it is possible to have a position on the existence of a thing while also having a view about the *value* of that thing's existence. Indeed, in my previous paper I pointed out that it seems possible for theists, agnostics and atheists alike to endorse any of the four axiological positions about the value of God's existence: pro-theism, anti-theism, indifferentism, and agnosticism.<sup>25</sup>

One question that has not yet been explored is whether the insider's or outsider's perspective on the existential question – whether God exists – is the most truth-conducive with respect to these four *axiological* positions. Suppose it turns out, for one reason or another, that the insider's perspective is the most truth-conducive when it comes to assessing the evidence for God's existence. Someone might think that such insiders are *also* best suited to determine whether pro-theism, anti-theism, indifferentism, or agnosticism is correct. But of course there is no *a priori* reason to suppose that things must be this way. Perhaps non-theists are better suited

than theists to impartially assess the axiological consequences of theism. Proponents of each view should develop and defend their best arguments for their position.

Another question well worth exploring is whether insiders or outsiders *with respect to these axiological positions* are best suited to assess the philosophical arguments for and against each one. In order to determine this, of course, we must first get clear on what constitutes these rival perspectives. There are, of course, propositional components to each, and my disagreement with Moser illustrates that it can be tricky to identify just exactly which propositions one must believe or accept in order to be an insider (or outsider) with respect to these axiological positions. Moreover, as I urged in my discussion of Penner, we should investigate whether there are essential affective or attitudinal components to being an insider (or outsider), and whether insiders can reasonably take themselves to have special incommunicable insight with respect to these positions. Once we are clear on what it means to be an insider (or outsider) to these four axiological positions, we can begin to investigate which one (if any) is most truth-conducive.

Philosophical questions about existence and value are often easy to state, but rather more difficult to answer. Questions like “Does God exist?” and “What difference would God’s existence make to the world?” are deceptive in their simplicity. Careful attention to the metaphilosophical issues involved in answering these questions will make our philosophical investigations rather more complex, but, ultimately, more thorough.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> My paper was entitled “Method and Madness in Contemporary Analytic Philosophy of Religion,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 29 (2013): 245-263, and it was the 2013 Newman Lecture, which I presented to the *Canadian Theological Society* on June 3, 2013. Penner’s reply is entitled “Analytic Philosophy, Theism, and Contemporary Philosophy of Religion,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 29 (2013): 265-270, and Moser’s is entitled “On The Axiology of Theism: Reply to Klaas J. Kraay,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 29 (2013): 271-276. I am very grateful to Penner and Moser for their thoughtful attention to my work.

<sup>2</sup> The video of this interview was widely circulated online, and has been viewed hundreds of thousands of times. It can be found here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jt1cOnNrY5s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jt1cOnNrY5s).

<sup>3</sup> “Analytic Philosophy ...,” 265-6. A minor quibble about Penner’s definition: whether or not one is prepared to *count oneself* as an active participant may not be germane to one’s status as insider or outsider. After all, it is possible to err in matters of self-identification.

<sup>4</sup> “Analytic Philosophy ...,” 266.

<sup>5</sup> I use “accept” here in the sense defended by William Alston, in his “Belief, Acceptance, and Religious Faith,” in *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality: The Philosophy of Religion Today*, ed. Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996): 3-27.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Moser, “Undermining the Case for Evidential Atheism,” *Religious Studies* 48 (2012): 90. Moser develops this theme further in his 2008 monograph, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology*, and his 2010 monograph, *The Evidence for God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined*, both of which are published by Cambridge University Press.

<sup>7</sup> For some trenchant criticisms of Moser’s project, see J.L. Schellenberg’s review of Moser’s *The Elusive God*, which appears in the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 69 (2011): 227-232.

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Lackey defines *epistemic peers* as individuals who are (1) roughly equally familiar with the evidence and arguments that bear on a given question and are (2) roughly equally competent, intelligent, and fair-minded in their assessment of it. (See her 2010 entry entitled “The Epistemology of Disagreement” in *Oxford Bibliographies Online*.)

<sup>9</sup> Peter van Inwagen, “It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Everyone to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence” in *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality: The Philosophy of Religion Today*, 137-153.

<sup>10</sup> David Christiansen, “The Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News,” *Philosophical Review* 116 (2007): 205.

<sup>11</sup> Peter van Inwagen’s Gifford Lectures were published under the title *The Problem of Evil* by Oxford University Press in 2006. Van Inwagen points out that, given this criterion, there are no successful philosophical arguments for any substantive philosophical thesis (52).

<sup>12</sup> For more on the composition of this ideal audience, see Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, 44-47.

<sup>13</sup> Mark T. Nelson, “Who are the Best Judges of Theistic Arguments?,” *Sophia* 35 (1996): 1-12.

<sup>14</sup> Nelson believes it unlikely that there are equally disinterested atheists or agnostics “... for the simple reason that it will be hard to be (or remain) indifferent to whether there exists an all-good, all-powerful person who is in charge of the universe and responsible for one’s eternal destiny” (4). Such a person, he adds, “...should be as unlikely as the person who is genuinely indifferent to whether there is a live tiger in the same house as her” (4). Perhaps this is true, but for Nelson’s argument to succeed, he needs to show not just that it is unlikely that non-theists are indifferent to the truth of theism, but also that it is unlikely that non-theists are indifferent to the success or failure of *arguments* for theism. For all Nelson shows, a non-theist who believed that *if theism were true, theistic belief would be properly basic* could be just as

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able to meet his disinterestedness requirement as those theists who actually take their belief in God to be properly basic.

<sup>15</sup> This question is not, I should stress, about the putative advantages or disadvantages of some individual or society *having religious beliefs* or *engaging in religious practices*. It is, instead, about the axiological difference that God's existence makes (or would make) to the world.

<sup>16</sup> "On the Axiology of Theism," 271-2.

<sup>17</sup> Some, indeed, are very prominent philosophers of religion, such as Richard Swinburne and Paul Moser himself. On the other hand, some other very prominent philosophers of religion, like Alvin Plantinga and Michael Almeida, endorse divine necessity.

<sup>18</sup> "On the Axiology of Theism," 272.

<sup>19</sup> "Method and Madness," 259.

<sup>20</sup> I do agree with Moser that thinking of God as a necessary being makes it more challenging to discuss how God's existence makes the world better (or worse) than it would otherwise be. In fact, in a co-authored paper published in 2013, Chris Dragos and I raise worries for three solutions to this problem proposed by Guy Kahane. ("On Preferring God's Non-Existence," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 43 (2013): 160-1.)

That said, it may turn out that an appeal to *impossible* worlds will assist in assessing the axiological effects of a necessarily existing divine being. My current research grant supports the work of Richard Davis, who aims to propose a new semantics for counterpossibles that will offer a way for the 'necessary being theist' to hold that the world's being worse on God's non-existence is a substantive, non-vacuous truth, rather than just a trivial one. For details, see: [www.ryerson.ca/~kraay/theism.html](http://www.ryerson.ca/~kraay/theism.html).

<sup>21</sup> "Method and Madness," 258.

<sup>22</sup> The papers are: Tim Mawson, "On Determining How Important it is Whether there is a God," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4 (2012): 95-105, and Kraay and Dragos, "On Preferring God's Non-Existence".

<sup>23</sup> See Guy Kahane, "Should We Want God to Exist?," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 82 (2011): 674-696.

<sup>24</sup> Chris Dragos and I criticize Kahane's proposal in "On Preferring God's Non-Existence".

<sup>25</sup> See "Method and Madness," 258, and also "On Preferring God's Non-Existence", 159.