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ARTICLE

Anti-Theists cannot have Theistic Faith

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Abstract
A topic of recent interest involves the nature of theistic faith, and in particular, the boundaries of such faith. For example, philosophers have taken opposing positions on whether atheists and agnostics can have theistic faith. I consider a related question: whether anti-theists, who think God's existence would be a bad thing, can have faith. I argue for a negative answer, although with several caveats.

Keywords: faith; desire; positivity; axiology of theism; anti-theism

1. Introduction

Much recent work in the philosophy of religion on *faith*: its nature, value, and rationality. Specifically, much ink has been spilled on the relationship between faith and belief: can you have faith that p if you withhold belief on p? What if you disbelieve p? While many are sympathetic to the idea that faith is consistent with withholding belief, only a few have defended the view that faith is consistent with disbelief.[1] At the same time, while it's widely held that faith involves a desire or pro-attitude, less attention has been paid to the boundaries of faith when it comes to desire.

This issue is connected to separate literature in the philosophy of religion: *the axiology of theism*. The axiology of theism concerns the question of whether God's existence would be a good thing. *Pro-theists* say yes, and *anti-theists* say no. Despite the recent attention that both faith and the axiology of theism have received in philosophy of religion circles, there has been little work bringing the two together. This is a shame, as they bear on each other in many interesting ways. While there are multiple features of the connection worth pursuing, I'll focus here on one stark result: most anti-theists cannot have theistic faith.

There are two reasons this is significant. First, it tells us about the nature and boundaries of faith, specifically theistic faith. Whether and when theistic faith is (im)possible is important for many reasons, including the centrality of faith to many religious traditions. Faith is a theological virtue and a key aspect, if not the most central aspect, of religious commitment.[2] Second, as noted previously, this paper will highlight connections between faith and the axiology of theism, which are noteworthy yet have gone unnoticed. In contemporary work on faith, the conative aspect of

[1]Pojman (1986), Audi (1991, 2008, 2011), Alston (1996), Speak (2007), Howard-Snyder (2013), Howard-Snyder & McKaughan (2022a), McKaughan & Howard-Snyder (2022a), among others, argue that faith that p is consistent with withholding belief on p. Whitaker (2019) and Lebens (2023) argue that faith that p is consistent with disbelief that p. For defenses of the claim that faith that p requires belief that p, see Mugg (2016), Malcolm & Scott (2017), Scott (2020), and Malcolm & Scott (2023).

[2]Note that it's controversial whether, how often, and in what sense, faith is a virtue. On some of these controversies, see Audi (2011), Jeffrey (2017a, 2017b), McKaughan & Howard-Snyder (2022b), and Jackson (2023a: section. 3c).

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religious commitment is underexplored (consider the amount of work in the philosophy of religion on topics such as the rationality of religious belief or faith's resilience in light of counterevidence). This paper aims to fill this lacuna and spark an ongoing conversation between questions about the axiology of God and questions about the nature and rationality of faith, especially concerning faith's conative or desire-like component.

This paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I provide some relevant background on both the axiology of theism (Section 2.1) and the nature of faith (Section 2.2). In Section 3, I argue for a neglected point: there's a serious tension between theistic faith and anti-theism. Most anti-theists cannot have theistic faith. I conclude in Section 4.

2. Background

2.1. The axiology of theism

Philosophy of religion questions often fall into three general (but non-exhaustive) categories. The first, the *ontology* of theism, involves the question of whether God exists. The second, the *epistemology* of theism, involves the question of whether we should believe in God. The third, the *axiology* of theism, involves the question of whether we should want God to exist. You can mix and match these views; for example, you could be a theist who thinks we should not believe in God or want God to exist; on the other hand, you could be an atheist who nonetheless holds that we should believe in God and want God to exist.[3] You could also maintain that we should not want God to exist, but we should believe that God exists (or vice versa).

Many philosophers of religion have paid more attention to the ontological and epistemological questions. Less has been done on the axiological question, although there's been a recent renewed interest in it.[4] Kahane (2011) kicked off much of the contemporary literature on the axiology of theism. There, he explains what exactly the axiological question is asking:

> We are not asking theists to conceive of God's death—to imagine that God stopped existing. And given that theists believe that God created the universe, when we ask them to consider His inexistence, we are not asking them to conceive an empty void… I will understand the comparison to involve the actual world and the closest possible world where (God does [not] exist) (676, brackets mine).

Then, to answer the axiological question, atheists should compare our world to the closest possible world in which God exists, and theists should compare our world to the closest possible world in which God does not exist. If we interpret "possible" as metaphysical possibility, however, this comparison is odd, as it's widely thought that if (a)theism is true, it's necessarily true. Then, the relevant value comparisons would require us to consider conditionals with necessarily false antecedents, which, on the standard Lewis-Stalnaker semantics, would all be trivially true.[5] To avoid this, many in the axiology of theism literature take the comparisons to instead involve *epistemic* possibility (that is, possibility given what we know). Thus, we'd compare our world to the closest epistemically possible world where (a)theism is true. In doing so, we can legitimately compare theistic and atheistic worlds (see Lougheed, 2020a: 8–17 for more on this problem and some other solutions).

There are two main views in the axiology of theism. *Pro-theists* maintain that it would be better if God existed (than if God did not exist); we should prefer theism to atheism. Pro-theists argue that if

[3]But for an interesting argument that theism entails pro-theism, see Ballard (2024).

[4]The axiology of theism was pioneered by Kahane (2011). See also Kraay and Dragos (2013), Lougheed (2020a, 2020b), and Kraay (2018, 2021).

[5]Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to address this.

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God exists, no evil (or much less evil) is gratuitous, there is ultimate cosmic justice, God may intervene in the world to help people, and the like.[6]

In contrast, *anti-theists* maintain that it would be better if God did not exist (than if God existed); we should prefer atheism to theism. Anti-theists argue that God's existence compromises our privacy (Kahane, 2011) and undermines our autonomy (Lougheed, 2019). Furthermore, several anti-theists have argued that some people's lives would be meaningless and absurd if God existed, especially those with projects and plans intimately connected to atheism.[7]

Pro- and anti-theism are not exhaustive. *Neutralism* is the view that God's existence makes no axiological difference; *quietism* is the view that the relevant value facts are undetermined or unknowable (see Kraay & Dragos, 2013 and Kraay, 2021 for more on these views, and a larger taxonomy of views in the axiology of theism). This paper, however, focuses on anti-theism.

Even with this restricted focus on anti-theism, two more distinctions will be useful later. The first distinction is between narrow and wide anti-theism (see Kraay, 2021: 5). On *narrow* anti-theism, God's existence makes things worse in some respects but not overall. For example, if God's existence makes us less autonomous, there is an associated value cost, but suppose that God also guarantees cosmic justice and ensures there is no gratuitous evil. Assuming the latter outweighs the former, God might make things worse in some respects but still make things better overall. On *wide* anti-theism, God's existence makes things worse overall.

The second distinction is between personal and impersonal anti-theism. *Personal* anti-theism is the view that God's existence would make things worse *for us*. *Impersonal* anti-theism is the view that if God exists, *the world* would be worse. For example, if God existed, and God is an infinitely valuable being, this might make the world better. Nonetheless, if God undermines our autonomy and invades our privacy, theism might be bad for us.

Now, we turn to a brief overview of the nature of faith.

2.2. The nature of faith

There are many kinds of faith. Here, we'll focus on faith as a mental state, or *attitudinal* faith, as opposed to faith as an action. We'll also focus on faith that a proposition is true, or *propositional* faith, as opposed to faith in a person or an ideal. Finally, since we are putting faith in conversation with the axiology of theism, our primary focus will be on religious faith, and more specifically, *theistic faith*, that is, faith that God exists.[8]

To shed light on the nature of faith, consider the difference between two kinds of mental states. *Cognitive* or epistemic states have a mind-to-world direction of fit. They aim at truth and represent the world in some way. They are normally responsive to evidence and are evaluated primarily from an epistemic point of view. Examples of cognitive mental states include beliefs, credences, and probability-beliefs.

Conative mental states, by contrast, have a world-to-mind direction of fit. They reflect one's desires or values. They do not aim at truth in the way cognitive attitudes do and thus do not require evidence for their contents. I can desire that p, even knowing p is false—e.g., I desire that I made my flight, but I know I missed it. Examples of conative mental states include desires, pro-attitudes, and beliefs about the good.

It's widely held that attitudinal faith involves both cognitive and conative mental states.[9] There is not a consensus on what the cognitive element of faith amounts to (but see Buchak, 2017 for a

[6]See Kraay and Dragos (2013), Penner and Lougheed (2015), Penner and Arbour (2018), and Jackson (forthcoming-b) for defenses of pro-theism.

[7]See Nagel (1997: 130), Kahane (2011, 2018), and Lougheed (2017, 2019, 2020a) for defenses of anti-theism. For more on the ways that (a)theism interacts with life's meaning, see Mawson (2016).

[8]For more on these distinctions between various kinds of faith, see Jackson (2023a). For summaries of recent literature on faith, see Buchak (2017), Rettler (2018), and Jackson (forthcoming-a).

[9]Those who argue that faith involves the conative and the cognitive include Howard-Snyder (2013), Page (2017), Jackson (2021), (2022a), (2022b), Howard-Snyder and McKaughan (2022a), Howard-Snyder and McKaughan (2022b), McKaughan and Howard-Snyder (2022a), McKaughan and Howard-Snyder (2022b), among many others.

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helpful overview). But one common view is that the cognitive element of faith need not be a belief per se, but could be something weaker, such as high confidence, thinking the proposition of faith is the most likely of alternatives, and the like (see Howard-Snyder, 2013).

That said, there's arguably more consensus on faith's conative element, which is more important for our purposes. Faith involves a positive conative attitude: a desire or desire-like state, approval of the object of faith, or viewing the object of faith positively in some sense.[10] For example, Alston (1996: 12) says that faith "necessarily involves some pro-attitude toward its object." Audi (2011: 54) similarily says, "If I have faith that God loves human beings, I have not just a cognitive attitude (the kind that, like belief, may be called true or false), but something more: a certain positive disposition toward the state of affairs being so, that is actually obtaining."

Note a few reasons for this consensus. First, faith's positivity explains what separates faith from mere belief. There are lots of things we merely believe that we do not desire to be true. But when we have faith that something is true, we have a desire for the object of faith, or a pro-attitude toward it, or a positive view of it—we are "for" it in some sense. Second, paradigm cases of faith involve positivity. If I have faith that you will win your game, I want you to win the game; if I have faith that it will be sunny, I see sunny weather as positive; if I have faith that there is an afterlife, I think the afterlife would be a good thing. This view also explains why negativity precludes faith; we do not have faith that there was a global pandemic or faith that a friend will never quit smoking.

Third, faith's positivity does not require us to accept the strong claim that faith entails a full-blown desire.[11] Instead, the view is merely that faith involves some kind of positive view of its object: for example, thinking p is the best out of the alternatives you are considering, a general approval of p, or a second-order desire for p (a desire to desire p). Or, those with faith that p may also have conflicting desires but ultimately find their desire for p slightly stronger than their desire for not-p.

The only contemporary authors that I'm aware of who deny the connection between faith and positivity are Malcolm and Scott (2021, 2023). Malcolm and Scott think that faith is *often* positive and that *many* examples of faith involve desire or positivity (Malcolm & Scott, 2021: 14–15). However, they deny that faith always involves positivity, and they suggest that there are cases where someone has faith that p but does not have a positive view of p. For example, they argue that you might have faith that people are predestined to hell—not because you want this to be true, but because this doctrine is a part of your religious commitment. You might find this doctrine confusing and difficult to swallow, and even hope that it's false, but you trust that God has a plan or reason (Malcolm & Scott, 2021: 18; Malcolm & Scott, 2023: 144). Malcolm and Scott provide several other potential counterexamples, including someone who has faith that biblical miracles occurred but does not approve of them and someone who has faith that church teachings are based on the word of God but does not want this to be true because it would require radical personal sacrifice (Malcolm & Scott, 2021: 17–18).

To defend the positivity theory, I maintain that these proposed counterexamples fall into one of two groups, following Jackson (2025). Some of the persons in the counterexamples genuinely have faith, in which case they genuinely have some kind of positive conative attitude to the object of faith (even if a weak one); they are likely conflicted (e.g., they have a desire for the proposition of faith to be true but also a desire for it to be false). For example, if you have faith that God predestines people to hell, you may not want this to be true. However, you are conflicted insofar as you trust that God

[10]Those who argue that faith involves desire or positivity include Alston (1996: 12), Plantinga (2000: 292), Schellenberg (2005: 133), Audi (2011: 67, 79), Howard-Snyder (2013: 362–363), Kvanvig (2013: 113), Buchak (2014: 53), Ballard (2017: 215–217), Page (2017), Jackson (2021: 41), Tweedt (2023, 2024) among many others. The idea that faith involves positivity (or "the will") traces back to at least Aquinas (*ST* IIaIIae 2.9 *ad* 2; IIaIIae 4.2; cf. Stump, 1991: 191). For more on Aquinas on faith, see Floyd (2024). For more on the history of faith, see Swindal (2024).

[11]See Jackson (2025). Some in the literature, such as Pojman (1986: 126), appear to endorse the stronger view that faith entails desire. Others more explicitly defend pluralism concerning faith's conative states; see Howard-Snyder and McKaughan (2022a) and McKaughan and Howard-Snyder (2022a).

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has a plan or good reason to allow this. Thus, you do have a positive attitude toward the proposition of faith; you have conflicting desires.

On the other hand, some of the proposed cases may not involve any kind of positive attitude toward the supposed object of faith. For this second group of cases, the people do not have faith toward the objects they do not view positively; however, they may have faith that closely related propositions are true, or faith in the person who testified the proposition, and the like. Compare: if a doctor tells me I have cancer, I do not have faith that I have cancer, but I trust the doctor and thus have faith in her and in her abilities to diagnose me. Similarly, persons in these counterexamples might have faith in God or faith in a religious leader who testifies that p, but lack faith that p. Then, while Malcolm and Scott's arguments are clever and interesting, there are plausible ways to explain their cases so that they are not genuine counterexamples to positivity theory.[12]

To sum up, it's widely held that attitudinal, theistic faith involves a cognitive and a conative component. If I have faith that God exists, I do not think God's existence is extremely unlikely or impossible.[13] Furthermore, I desire God to exist or view God's existence positively. With this background in place, we'll now turn to the relationship between anti-theism and theistic faith.

3. Why (Most) Anti-Theists cannot have Theistic Faith

This section considers the boundaries of theistic faith. While this general topic has been addressed before, it's mostly been considered from a doxastic point of view. For example, some have argued that only those who *believe* that God exists can have theistic faith (Malcolm & Scott, 2017, 2023; Mugg, 2016). Others have argued that agnostics can have theistic faith but not atheists (Howard-Snyder, 2019; Howard-Snyder & McKaughan, 2022a). Here, we'll consider faith's boundaries, but instead of focusing on the doxastic, we'll focus on the conative. What limitations does theistic faith put on what the faithful can *desire*? Ultimately, I'll argue that most anti-theists cannot have theistic faith.

3.1. Varieties of anti-theism

As we saw in the last section, theistic faith involves a positive evaluation of its object. If you have faith that God exists, you view theism in a positive light. Those with theistic faith view God's existence as a good thing, prefer or desire God to exist, and/or have a pro-attitude toward God's existence. Thus:

> **Positivity requirement:** If S has faith that God exists, S has an overall positive conative attitude toward God's existence.

Note that an "overall" positive conative attitude is required, meaning that S's general mental state must portray God's existence positively. This is meant to rule out cases where, say, S strongly prefers God not to exist but technically has conflicting desires. A weak, clearly overridden desire will not be enough for the positivity requirement; positivity must, in some sense, be a feature of S's general view of God's existence.[14]

[12]Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to expand on this response to Malcolm and Scott. This response draws on a longer response to Malcolm and Scott on behalf of positivity theory from Jackson (2025). See also Waggoner (forthcoming).

[13]For a discussion of the possibility that faith that p might be consistent with an extremely low credence in p, see Howard-Snyder and McKaughan's discussion of Lara Buchak's view of faith (Howard-Snyder & McKaughan, 2022b: 317–323). For more on faith's relationship to credence, see Jackson (2019).

[14]Thanks to an editor at this journal for helpful discussion.

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Consider now anti-theism. While we saw a general overview earlier, at this point, it's worth being more specific. In fact, there are (at least) four ways to be an anti-theist found in the literature:

Anti-theist (desire): Anti-theists desire God not to exist (Nagel, 1997: 130).

Anti-theist (desire-normative): Anti-theists believe that we should desire God not to exist (Kahane, 2011: 679).

Anti-theist (comparative-value-belief): Anti-theists believe that things would be better if God did not exist than if God existed (Kraay, 2021: 2).

Anti-theist (absolute-value-belief): Anti-theists believe that things would be bad if God existed (Lougheed, 2019: sec 3).

These positions are, of course, related but distinct.[15] And it's unclear that the literature converges on one as fundamentally characteristic of the anti-theist. For example, Nagel (1997: 130), who is often attributed as an early anti-theist, says he "hopes" and does not "want" there to be a God, which most closely aligns with **anti-theist (desire).** Kahane (2011: 679) characterizes the anti-theist as not wanting God to exist and holding that they are "justified in wanting God not to exist," which involves both **anti-theist (desire)** and **anti-theist (desire-normative).** Kraay (2021: 2) characterizes the anti-theist as **anti-theist (comparative value-belief)**. Lougheed (2019: sec 3) says that the anti-theist "holds that it would be bad if God were to exist," which suggests **anti-theist (absolute-value-belief).** Lougheed also provides examples of anti-theists who simply desire God not to exist.

Finally, consider two ways that faith and anti-theism might be in tension:

Descriptive inconsistency: The anti-theist theistic cannot have faith as a matter of descriptive, psychological fact.

Normative inconsistency: The anti-theist cannot *rationally* have theistic faith.[16]

We'll see that certain, robust anti-theists cannot have theistic faith, descriptively or normatively. Then, we'll explore how weaker strands of anti-theism are consistent with theistic faith. Finally, we'll return to strong anti-theism and consider two potential exceptions to the claim that faith and strong anti-theism are inconsistent.

3.2. (Most) Strong anti-theists cannot have theistic faith

Given these distinctions, in what sense are anti-theism and faith inconsistent? Well, first consider "strong anti-theist": the person who is a wide anti-theist in all four senses (we'll address narrow anti-theism in Section 3.3). The strong anti-theist desires God not to exist, affirms this desire as rational, and believes that God's existence would make things worse in both an absolute sense and a comparative sense (that is, compared to atheism). Given the nature and scope of these attitudes, it seems irrational for the strong anti-theist to also take a general positive conative attitude toward

[15]As we'll see later, any of these positions can be understood in a narrow or wide sense. Note also that the comparative/absolute distinction could be framed in terms of both values beliefs and desires (or preferences); however, those in the literature tend to frame it as value-beliefs, so I've followed suit, and I do not think much will hang on the desire/value belief distinction for our purposes. Thanks to Chris Tweedt and an anonymous referee for helpful discussion and clarification of the various distinctions here.

[16]Where the rationality in question would be the sense in which *desires* can be rational or irrational (so practical rationality is a likely candidate, but there is disagreement here; see Ballard, 2017). Thanks to Brian Ballard and Chris Tweedt for helpful discussion on this point and the various distinctions made in Section 3.1.

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God's existence: they judge theism as comparatively and absolutely bad, desire God not to exist, and take this desire to be rational.

Furthermore, it also seems extremely psychologically difficult for a strong anti-theist to have faith, even if they are irrational. This person would be engaged, at best, in a serious kind of double-mindedness. While they could perhaps think there are very limited, small respects in which God's existence would be a good thing (that is narrow pro-theism), this is insufficient for a general (that is wide) positive conative attitude toward theism, as these small benefits will likely be swamped by the other, sweeping negative value judgments they make about theism. So, strong anti-theism is normatively, and in most cases, descriptively inconsistent with having theistic faith (with an extreme kind of double-mindedness being a rare but possible exception).

This point is strengthened by considerations raised by Ballard (2024). Ballard considers biblical theism in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which involves worship and devotion to God. Ballard argues that those who are biblical theists not only cannot be anti-theists but should be pro-theists. Ballard (2024: 13–14) explains:

> The Bible understands marriage as a picture of religious faith. The bond between one spouse and another parallels the bond between God and humanity. One aspect of this parallel is the level of devotion the bond requires. And, in marriage as in faith, that level of devotion cannot survive the thought that the beloved, whether human or divine, makes our lives worse overall.

While Ballard's point is less about the pro-attitude required for faith and more about a biblical understanding of worshipful love, it's instructive for our purposes. The level of devotion required for theistic faith is not consistent with viewing the object of faith negatively. Because the strong anti-theist takes a robust, intensely negative stance to theism, they cannot have theistic faith.[17] (However, as we'll see in the next section, I do not think theistic faith requires pro-theism.)

One might wonder: should we characterize anti-theism in this strong sense, that is, as the conjunction of all four senses of anti-theism? Is this out of step with the axiology literature? I think not; those in this literature often take anti-theism to involve several, if not all, of the aforementioned categories of anti-theism. For one, as mentioned, many authors (e.g., Kahane, Lougheed) seem to understand anti-theism as a conjunction of several of the positions above. Second, there are plausible principles that connect these strands of anti-theism (e.g., principles that connect our beliefs about goodness and what we (should) desire; see e.g. Hazlett, 2021; Gregory, 2021). Third, it seems psychologically natural that those who are anti-theists in one sense would be anti-theists in other senses (we probably endorse most of our desires as rational, otherwise, we'd give them up; our desires generally tend to correlate with our beliefs about value, etc.). For all these reasons, I do not think understanding anti-theism in the strong sense is inappropriate. And as we have seen, there's a general incompatibility between faith and this strong anti-theism. But, as we'll see, that does not mean that all forms of anti-theism preclude faith.

3.3. Weaker anti-theism and faith?

There are thinner versions of anti-theism that are compatible with having theistic faith. This is important because while faith that God exists has boundaries and conditions—not everyone has theistic faith—we do not want to be overly exclusive either. Setting the bar too high might exclude real and significant cases of faith. Thus, it's worth considering forms of anti-theism that might be compatible with theistic faith.

First, and perhaps most obvious, is narrow anti-theism. Recall that the narrow anti-theist maintains that God's existence makes the world worse in some respects, but not overall; they have a *pro tanto* desire for God not to exist. This desire could be relatively strong, and they could even

[17]Thanks to Brian Ballard for helpful discussion.

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endorse it as rational. But suppose they have conflicting desires: while it's true they desire God not to exist, they feel conflicted, and they want God to exist on another level or for other reasons. Those with conflicting desires can still have faith if their desire for theism is stronger (even marginally stronger) than their desire for atheism. One might have just the slightest preference for theism over atheism, but this is sufficient for the positivity of faith. This anti-theist will lack the general value judgments that God's existence is bad (or worse than God's nonexistence), as they are merely a narrow anti-theist, but could still have a *pro tanto* desire for God not to exist and endorse this desire as rational.[18]

Second, consider the anti-theist who desires God not to exist (the first sense of anti-theism), but, on a higher level, fails to identify with this desire. Here, there are two possibilities. The anti-theist might think their anti-theist desire is *irrational.* They might overall judge God's existence to be a good thing because, say, theism would provide their life a special kind of meaning and purpose, but for some reason, they cannot shake the desire for God not to exist—perhaps they think there would be additional, difficult moral obligations on theism. But they also think this latter consideration does not rationalize their anti-theistic desire. In general, we can have desires that we do not endorse —the desire to sit around all day when deadlines are looming, the desire to get back with an abusive ex, and so forth. While these are genuine desires, insofar as we do not endorse them, we realize that their objects are not ultimately good for us. Then, an anti-theist who takes their anti-theistic desire to be irrational could possibly have theistic faith.

Note further that endorsing a desire as rational is distinct from having a *second-order* desire (a desire to desire something); you could endorse a desire as rational but lack the desire to have the desire. Then, a related but distinct possibility for anti-theistic faith is to have a higher-order desire for God to exist but a first-order desire for God not to exist.[19] In sum, the anti-theist with either (i) the un-endorsed desire for atheism or (ii) the mere higher-order desire for theism can both rationally and psychologically have the positive attitude required for theistic faith.

What's more, recall the distinction between personal and impersonal anti-theism: *Personal* anti-theism is the view that God's existence is worse *for us. Impersonal* anti-theism is the view that God's existence makes *the world* worse. This distinction provides additional wiggle room in terms of the compatibility of faith and anti-theism. Consider, for example, someone who thinks God's existence would be a bad thing for the world but a good thing for themselves: an impersonal anti-theist but a personal pro-theist. This person could nonetheless conceivably desire God to exist or at least have the relevant pro-attitudes required for faith. The personal anti-theist but impersonal pro-theist may also be able to have theistic faith. The extent to which these combinations are possible seems to depend, at least partially, on one's background preferences. For example, consider a selfless individual who cares much more about the world than himself. Suppose he thinks God's existence would be good for himself but bad for the world. Because the sense in which he's a pro-theist is insignificant to him, he may be precluded from having theistic faith. But on the other hand, if he were an impersonal pro-theist but a personal anti-theist, given his background preferences, he seems like an apt candidate for theistic faith.[20]

Finally, consider two reasons that those with theistic faith need not be strong, considered, or committed pro-theists. First, theistic faith seems consistent with neutralism (understood as the belief that God does not make a value difference). Plausibly, one could be a neutralist but nonetheless have a slight personal preference for theism (in the same way that one could be an agnostic but have a slightly higher credence—or subjective probability—that God exists).

[18]Although, as Sylwia Wilczewaska points out, it's not clear this person is truly an anti-theist, since they are a narrow anti-theist but a wide pro-theist.

[19]Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing out that higher-order desire comes apart from endorsing a desire as rational, so there are two distinct possibilities here.

[20]Thanks to an anonymous referee for this example and the insight that background preferences are relevant.

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Second, consider the person who has never explicitly considered the axiological question or formed any beliefs about the value of (a)theism. They could want God to exist, even without explicit beliefs about theism's value or goodness; this stance would not preclude theistic faith. Furthermore, even if this person lacked a full-blown desire that God exists, they might have another positive stance to theism: a higher-order desire, a general approval, or something similar (see Jackson 2025). Then, they could still have faith, as these weaker conative attitudes are sufficient for faith's positivity, even though they lack both explicit pro-theistic beliefs and a desire for theism.

3.4. Strong anti-theism redux

We saw in Section 3.2 that there's a general incompatibility between strong anti-theism and faith. In this final subsection, I explore two possible exceptions to this general claim. Note that these both require certain attitudes or actions that are unlikely to be characteristic of most anti-theists, so these possibilities do not affect my ultimate conclusion that *most* anti-theists cannot have theistic faith.

First, suppose someone finds themselves convinced by the arguments for anti-theism. They are a strong anti-theist. However, they are unhappy about this; they grudgingly accept anti-theism. While this person is an anti-theist, perhaps even in all four senses above, they are reluctant. They wish they were not convinced by anti-theistic arguments; they wish they had better grounds to desire God to exist and/or better arguments that God's existence would be a good thing. As a specific example, consider someone who suspects that their anti-theism brings them one step closer to abandoning their childhood faith and thus their entire way of life. While they may be a strong anti-theist, there's still a sense in which they fail to identify with this desire (see Frankfurt 1971).[21] I'm open to the possibility that this person, and others who similarly fail to identify with their anti-theism, could have religious faith. Insofar as they regret their anti-theism, this may count as a weak but general positive conative attitude to theism. They are comparable to the faithful person with a mere higher-order desire for theism.

Second, recall that at the beginning of the paper, we restricted our focus to attitudinal faith. Faith as an attitude requires certain cognitive and conative attitudes toward its object. But consider action-focused faith: faith as an action. Plausibly, this is what we are thinking of when we say that someone takes a "leap of faith." Action-focused faith conceivably does not require the attitudes that are necessary for attitudinal faith (Jackson, 2024; Speak, 2007). Thus, strong anti-theists may be able to have action-focused theistic faith (that is, it's psychologically possible for them to act as if theism were true), even if they in no sense desire God to exist or take theism to be a positive thing.

Could it ever be *rational* for a strong anti-theist to take a leap of faith? Yes, for the anti-theist who is a *theist.* We rationally act on p because we believe p (even though do not desire p) all the time, e.g., there's a global pandemic, it's raining, I missed my flight. However, a more challenging question: could the *atheist anti-theist* rationally take a leap of faith? That's less clear, as on the standard models, rational action is a function of the conative and the cognitive. While, in some circumstances, just a conative attitude or just a cognitive attitude is sufficient for rational action (see Jackson, 2021, 2024), the atheist anti-theist lacks both. It's not even clear that such a person could, say, take Pascal's wager without some kind of general pro-theistic stance (that is acknowledging the goodness of the possibility on which God exists and they take the wager; see Jackson, 2023b). Then, the atheist anti-theist may need a change in mental states before they can rationally take a leap of faith.

4. Conclusion

When the axiology of theism and the faith literatures are brought together, significant insights and new areas of research are revealed. Most notably, we have seen that theistic faith is inconsistent with

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a strong anti-theistic stance: most strong anti-theists cannot have theistic faith. The resulting view is not overly restrictive; faith does not require explicit pro-theistic beliefs, and anti-theists of certain limited stripes can have faith. It's also not overly inclusive, as once we consider faith's positivity requirement, the tension is clear. One who is a strong anti-theist, in both personal and impersonal senses, with no higher-order desires for theism or other positive conative attitudes toward theism, is excluded from having attitudinal theistic faith.

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