

Spiritual Yearning and the Axiology of Theism and Other Worldviews

Abstracts

Gratitude and the Longing for Redemption

[Charity Anderson](#) (Baylor University)

People generally desire to be content with their lives. Personal suffering and the amount of suffering in the world present a challenge for contentment. One strategy employed by many religious people is to practice being grateful. Sometimes the recommendation is to be grateful to God for everything – the good and the bad. This paper argues that some ways of practicing gratitude can (counterintuitively) stifle spiritual yearning. Gratitude, though a virtue, can be mistaken, misleading, or excessive. Gratitude aimed at contentment, self-fulfillment, or happiness is the wrong motivation. When gratitude rushes in, in an effort to try to make sense of the world, it presupposes something we don't have access to now, namely, seeing how the suffering will be redeemed. Insofar as gratitude involves pretending that we see now something that hasn't been revealed, it is in tension with longing for redemption. The desire to see the fulfillment of redemption is something we ought to have, but this longing requires that we tolerate some level of discontentment with the world. There is a tradeoff here, between the respects in which we are better off by increasing our gratitude and better off by maintaining a proper spiritual yearning. Finally, as both gratitude and contentment are common practices in many religions, this paper will explore whether some religion's attitudes towards suffering encourage this strain of gratitude more than others.

Longing for the Afterlife as Virtuous Spiritual Yearning

[Brian Ballard](#) (Loyola Marymount University)

Many of those who have left religion behind still experience spiritual yearning, “the drive for existential meaning and security through connection with something greater than oneself.” (Wilt et al., 2025, 323). But is spiritual yearning virtuous? Is it good to be the sort of person who tends to feel such yearning? To answer this, I want to notice first that spiritual yearning, as it is typically defined in the literature, tends to focus on an individual seeking to meet certain of his or her needs. But I think there is another and quite distinct starting point for spiritual yearning. And, as I wish to explain in this essay, I think there is something especially virtuous about spiritual yearning arising from this other starting point. Imagine a naturalist taking stock of the world as he understands it. Would he have good reasons for feeling a serious and nagging discontentment about the state of things? He would indeed: the many people (and animals) whose lives appear to be horrific and irreversible tragedies. This is not the sort of thing we should readily make peace with. And refusing to make peace with horrific suffering might reasonably lead one to long for an afterlife in which the lives of sufferers are finally set right for them. And I submit that longing for such an afterlife would seem to count as (a) spiritual yearning, and (b) virtuous as a manifestation of care for sufferers. Whether this sort of spiritual yearning is ultimately virtuous depends on the axiology of the afterlife: Would it be better if there were an afterlife? This question is analogous to the focus of the recent axiology of theism. Thus, I want to end this essay by comparing these two axiologies and their bearing on the virtuousness of spiritual yearning.

Spiritual Yearning and the Sacred Earth: An Indigenous Axiology of Land.

[Brian Burkhart](#) (University of Oklahoma)

Recent discussions in the axiology of theism ask whether the existence of God would make human lives better or worse and frequently interpret spiritual yearning as a desire for divine meaning, purpose, or transcendence. This paper expands that debate by examining an Indigenous alternative in which the primary object of spiritual yearning is neither God nor ultimate reality conceived apart from the world, but the sacredness of land itself. Drawing primarily on Vine Deloria Jr.'s account of Indigenous spirituality in *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*, I argue that spiritual yearning can be understood as a response to estrangement from sacred relationships with particular places, lands, and the living earth. Deloria describes modernity as producing a profound spiritual dislocation through the reduction of land to property, resource, and economic object, thereby severing human beings from the sacred relationships that traditionally grounded meaning, responsibility, and collective existence.

To illuminate this alternative, I develop an axiology of Indigenous land sacredness. Whereas contemporary debates often evaluate the value of worldviews according to their ability to provide meaning through narratives, divine purpose, salvation, or cosmic order, Indigenous traditions frequently locate meaning in participation within a living network of reciprocal relations that includes human communities, nonhuman beings, ancestors, and land itself. On this view, sacredness is a generative relationship that constitutes earthly existence rather than a property of a transcendent. The value of such a worldview lies not in providing escape from finitude or contingency but in cultivating belonging, groundedness, reciprocity, responsibility, and continuity with place.

The paper further argues that Indigenous spiritual yearning reveals a neglected possibility within contemporary axiological debates. The deepest spiritual lack may not be a “God-shaped hole,” nor a desire for autonomy from divine authority. The deepest spiritual lack may be a yearning for reconnection with sacred earthly relations. In this respect, Indigenous land-based spirituality offers a distinctive response to both pro-theistic and anti-theistic accounts of spiritual yearning. The question here is not whether God exists; it is whether human beings inhabit a concrete and earthly world experienced as sacred. By centering the sacredness of land, Indigenous traditions suggest that spiritual fulfillment arises not through transcendence beyond the earth, but through renewed participation in living earthly relations that both generate and ground meaning and existence.

Intrinsic Value Relational Pro-Theism

[Scott Davison](#) (Emeritus, Morehead State University)

A virtuous person recognizes value and responds to it appropriately. It would be virtuous to worship a divine being, but only if that divine being actually exists – otherwise, worship would signal a failure of virtue (see Davison 2025). It would also be virtuous to cooperate with a divine being in repairing and restoring the world, improving one's own self and one's relationships, and growing in knowledge and appreciation for divinity – but only if a divine being actually exists. Finally, spiritual yearning involves a desire to be unified with the world and the divine. So pro-theism is connected to spiritual yearning and virtue: the satisfaction of spiritual yearning and the realization of various virtues depends upon the existence of some divine being. Elsewhere, I have argued that the intrinsic value of the world would be significantly higher if God existed than otherwise (see Davison 2012 and Davison 2018). Here I appeal to the concept of intrinsic value to develop the connections mentioned above about pro-theism, virtue, and spiritual yearning in detail. More specifically, I argue that the existence of a being than which none could be intrinsically better would make all of these things possible for us.

The Desire to Thank: Spiritual Yearning and the Virtue of Gratitude

[Peter Furlong](#) (Valencia College)

Gratitude, understood as a virtue, involves the stable disposition to react to beneficence in particular ways. Plausibly, one element of a grateful response is delight in and appreciation of the good bestowed. Crucially, a virtuously grateful agent will recognize and value the existence of another's beneficent motives, perhaps far higher than the actual good bestowed by the benefactor. Supposing this is correct, then there is good reason to think that the virtue of gratitude can give rise to the experience of spiritual yearning. The virtuously grateful agent will plausibly already have a tendency to appreciate unearned goods, both in their own life and in the world more broadly. They will also recognize, however, that the possibility of these goods having been beneficently given by a perfect being (rather than delivered through blind forces) would bring further things to appreciate, things especially connected to the virtue of gratitude. In particular, the grateful agent would appreciate and rejoice in the beneficent motives of the benefactor, the opportunity for grateful responses, which the virtuous agent will recognize as a good rather than a burden, and the possibility of a further relationship built upon and partially constituted by a bond of gratitude. Given this recognition of great, possible goods, the virtuously grateful agent will tend (all else being equal) to long for the existence of and a relationship with such a perfect benefactor.

Spiritual Yearning as a Precondition for Theistic Faith

[Liz Jackson](#) (Saint Louis University)

This project investigates the role of spiritual yearning as a constitutive component of theistic faith, and its implications for the axiology of theism. Recent work emphasizes that faith involves a positive conative orientation toward its object (McKaughan & Howard-Snyder 2022; Buchak 2023; Jackson 2025), yet little attention has been given to how such pro-attitudes relate to broader patterns of spiritual longing. I argue that spiritual yearning – understood as a deep desire for existential goods such as truth, meaning, moral goodness, and relationship with the divine – is not merely compatible with virtuous theistic faith but is partially constitutive of it. In particular:

S has virtuous theistic faith only if S possesses some degree of spiritual yearning for existential goods.

While this claim is consistent with the faithful being, at points, confused, conflicted, and unsure about their faith, it also suggests that deep down, virtuous theistic faith is motivated by a longing for God and/or God's gifts (i.e. existential goods). If this is correct, faith's positive conative orientation is thicker and more robust than previous authors have suggested.

This central claim about the virtues and vices of spiritual yearning has implications for the axiology of theism. Virtuous yearning – marked by the deep desire for existential goods – aligns with pro-theistic orientations, which in turn suggests that theistic faith and pro-theism are closely connected. In contrast, disordered forms of yearning – such as wishful thinking, pride, or fear – can distort both faith and evaluative attitudes toward God's existence, which helps explain the tension between faith and anti-theism (cf. Jackson 2024). I suggest, then, that faith doesn't merely involve a pro-attitude, but it affects our deepest motivational structures.

Pro-Theism, Virtue, and Pascal

[Guy Kahane](#) (University of Oxford)

We can ask whether we should believe that God exists, and why. But we can also ask what such belief, or its absence, tells us about a person's character and motives. Some theists claim, for example, that faith is a virtue or that disbelief is motivated by willful rejection of the good, and therefore a vice. These value claims would explain why, on some familiar views, God would reward believers and punish atheists in the afterlife. And Pascal famously argued, on this basis, that we have pragmatic reasons to try to come to believe in theism. Conversely, some atheists see theist belief not merely as an epistemic mistake, but as reflecting a character flaw, for example, of lacking the courage to face the truth about our place in a cold and indifferent universe.

In past work, I argued that we can ask, not only whether God exists, but also whether it would really be better if God exists, or had existed. And I further argued that we can have corresponding attitudes to the question of God's existence: an atheist might, for example, feel spiritual yearning for a missing god (pro-theism) while a theist might regret that there is a god (anti-theism). The debate in the axiology of theism has largely focused on arguments for such opposing pro-theist and anti-theist positions.

But if what people believe bears on our evaluation of their character and motives, what they prefer or wish should bear on that to an even greater degree. In this paper, I will consider whether and how ascriptions of virtue and vice apply to pro-theist and anti-theist attitudes. I will further argue that our answer to this question will also affect our answers to the more familiar questions about belief and disbelief. In particular, I will consider an argument to the effect that it is anti-theism, rather than atheism, that might be considered a vice. Should, for example, God really reward belief in Him that is accompanied by an anti-theist attitude? Conversely, what is the fault in lack of belief if it is accompanied by genuine spiritual yearning? If this is right, and anti-theism is the main vice here, then this will complicate, and change, our understanding of Pascal's argument. I will end by assessing a Pascalian argument for becoming a pro-theist. This argument, and the background questions about virtue and vice, ultimately turn, I will suggest, on how we understand the epistemology of value, and how it interacts with theism. I will conclude by arguing that, were they to arrive at the pearly gates, the anti-theist could join Russell in complaining, 'Not enough evidence'.

African Vitalism and Yearning to Belong to God

[Kirk Lougheed](#) (University of Pretoria)

While someone might reasonably yearn for God to exist because it would mean that (a) their life has cosmic significance; (b) the evil they experience is not gratuitous, and (b) there is a perfect judge who will eventually set all things right, another kind of yearning for God is probably best described as a desire for *belonging*. If a loving God exists who deeply desires to commune with individuals, this offers a unique sense of belonging that humans cannot find elsewhere. Not only is yearning for God to exist out of a desire to belong reasonable, but it also furnishes a reason for pro-theism, the view that God's existence would be a good thing. I explore the implications different conceptions of God have on one's ability to belong to God. In particular, I suggest that the African approaches to God that endorse vitalism – the view that everything is imbued with a force that comes from God – provides a better metaphysical ground for belonging than does the Abrahamic God often theorized about in the Anglo-American literature. On the African view, not only is everyone and everything connected in virtue of possessing vital force, but the world is not divided into distinct spiritual and physical realms. Instead, there is the visible and invisible, but these exist in the very same realm. People can therefore have direct contact with the departed dead and ancestors who continue to live

in the same realm and in some ways serve as representatives of God. These metaphysical views are just another way in which the African religious and moral traditions are distinctly communitarian. It is unsurprising to find that a significant branch of the African religious tradition provides the metaphysical basis for greater belonging than the Abrahamic God. I tentatively conclude that a spiritual yearning to belong to God is better fulfilled by the African vitalistic God than the Abrahamic one.

Is There a Vice of Excess Spiritual Yearning?

[Daniel Rubio](#) (Toronto Metropolitan University)

My paper will develop and explore a tension between the following theses:

ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUE: virtues exist as the mean between two vices, one of which expresses the excess of a quality and the other of which expresses its lack.

AXIOLOGICAL PRINCIPAL PRINCIPLE: the correct (or fitting) level of desire for something is proportionate to its objective value

DIVINE VALUE SUPERABUNDANCE: God's objective value has no upper bound.

An initial tension appears as follows. ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUE says that any desire is subject to vicious excess. AXIOLOGICAL PRINCIPAL PRINCIPLE tells us that the correct desire for God should be proportionate to God's objective value. DIVINE VALUE SUPERABUNDANCE tells us that this correct desire is unbounded. But wherever the virtuous Aristotelian mean sits for desire for the divine (a kind of spiritual yearning), an unbounded desire exceeds it. Conflict.

Here are some potential resolutions. Resolution 1: metanormative dilemma. Virtue theory and the theory of rationality mandate incompatible levels of spiritual yearning. The rational amount is also vicious. This opens conceptual space for rational vices. Resolution 2: disjunctive account of virtue. ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUE is a good heuristic, but in cases of unbounded objective value it breaks down. Resolution 3: failure of AXIOLOGICAL PRINCIPAL PRINCIPLE. Once again we have a good heuristic, but one that breaks down in the case of unbounded objective value.

I argue for Resolution 1. The general reasons that favor ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUE and AXIOLOGICAL PRINCIPAL PRINCIPLE do not call for a heuristic, and demotion of either principle adds complications to either the theory of virtue or the theory of substantive rationality. There are not correspondingly strong and general reasons to expect harmony between the theory of rational preference and the theory of virtuous agency. This leads to an interesting new form of anti-theism, which we might call normative anti-theism, where it turns out that in at least some respects the theory of normativity runs more smoothly without a god.

Spiritual Yearning, Pro-Theistic Ultimism, and Pessimistic Virtue

[Sameer Yadav](#) (Baylor University)

Theism, as Schellenberg (2007) has helpfully summarized it, is a commitment to "personal ultimism". The "ultimist" bit expresses a belief that the most fundamental reality consists in something that explains and grounds all existence and value, as well as the desirability of some kind of "soteriological" dependence of the penultimate upon the ultimate, which itself requires no

metaphysical, axiological, or soteriological ground. The “personalist” bit expresses a belief that the ultimate exhibits the characteristic features of mind and will in virtue of which we can regard it and relate to it as an agent, as persons to a person. In this essay I draw attention to a neglected dimension of the challenge theists confront from the phenomena of suffering, and especially horrendous suffering. Namely, our yearning for divine consolation in suffering is profoundly shaped by our expectations about how divine ultimacy and divine personhood ought to come together in God. I argue that when comparing more ultimist theisms (those that retain but subordinate or attenuate the nature and significance of God’s person-likeness) with more personalist theisms (those that retain but subordinate or attenuate the nature and significance of divine ultimacy) and the attitudes of spiritual yearning and expectation for divine consolation that each merits, ultimist theisms come out as decidedly the more pessimistic of the two regarding God’s sharing of our value-orientation to the protections and preservations of human persons. Nevertheless, I shall go on to suggest that a pessimistic spiritual yearning merited by theistic ultimism is better suited to the cultivation of virtue in our suffering than most (perhaps all) varieties of optimism merited by theistic personalism.