

The Ontological Slide

Value Hierarchies, Semantic Capture, and the Redefinition of God

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Central claim

Evidence that a person has a highest value can establish practical priority and perhaps a religion-like role. It does not by itself establish that the valued object is a deity or that a specified form of theism is true. Calling every highest value a “god” therefore yields either a useful but non-metaphysical metaphor or a metaphysical conclusion whose missing bridge still requires evidence.

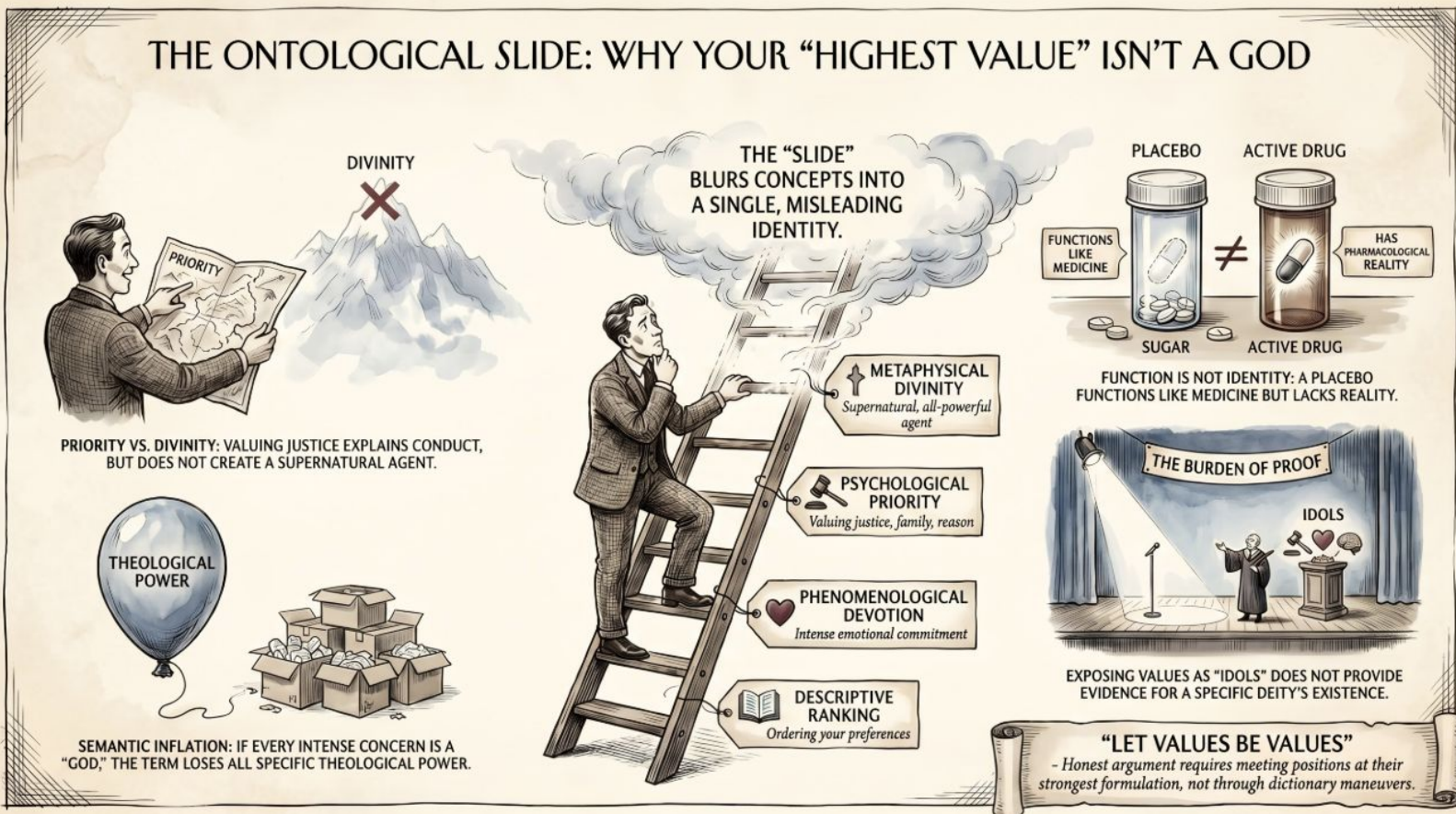
Preview: A priority can organize a life without becoming a deity

Starting point	Possible role	Missing bridge	Limited conclusion
People rank values and act on their strongest commitments.	A value may organize identity, sacrifice, hope, or loyalty in religion-like ways.	Functional resemblance does not show that the value is an agent, creator, or metaphysical reality.	A highest value can be called a “god” metaphorically; its existence does not establish a deity or specified theism.

The argument concerns public evidence, not the legitimacy of religious self-examination. Within a theological tradition, calling a finite allegiance “idolatrous” may express a moral judgment. That internal judgment does not, without further premises, prove the tradition’s metaphysical claims to someone outside it.

Visual preview:

THE ONTOLOGICAL SLIDE: WHY YOUR “HIGHEST VALUE” ISN’T A GOD



Read the central ladder as an invalid promotion of a claim, not as a psychological timeline. Moving upward from a value’s rank, to devotion-like behavior, to the assertion of metaphysical divinity requires a new supporting premise at each step; the graphic’s crossed final arrow marks the unsupported step from function to identity. The placebo comparison makes the same narrow point: two things can produce one similar effect without being the same kind of thing. The all-caps word “GOD” in the image is the apologetic label under examination, not an accepted description of reason, justice, family, or any other finite value. The image does not argue that no deity exists; it shows why value-ranking alone cannot establish one.

Abstract

The claim that everyone has a “god” because everyone has a highest value combines a plausible account of human motivation with a disputed metaphysical conclusion. People do rank goods, organize life around concerns, and sometimes treat finite commitments with devotion normally associated with religion. None of this is yet evidence that the valued object is a deity or that any specified God-concept is instantiated.

This paper reconstructs the strongest version of the claim and separates four levels: practical priority, religion-like role, deity status, and specified theism. It then applies three tests. A bridge test asks what premise connects one level to the next. A meaning test asks whether “god” retains the metaphysical content needed by the conclusion. A discrimination test asks whether the evidence is more expected if a specified theistic hypothesis is true than if it is false. The tactic fails all three when a value hierarchy is its only evidence.

The result is a dilemma. On a functional reading, “god” can serve as a vivid metaphor for an organizing concern, but the conclusion is psychological or moral rather than metaphysical. On a literal reading, the conclusion is metaphysical, but functional resemblance does not supply the needed evidence. This does not show that no deity exists, forbid conceptual revision, or empty theological warnings about idolatry of their internal force. It shows only that redefining a highest value as a “god” cannot substitute for an argument for a deity or a specified form of theism.

Keywords: value hierarchy; ultimate concern; idolatry; persuasive definition; category mistake; theism; apologetics; conceptual analysis

1 The Strongest Version of the Claim

The slogan “everyone has a god” is easy to dismiss if it is treated as nothing more than wordplay. Its strongest versions deserve a more careful reading. Human lives are structured by care. People make tradeoffs, accept costs, protect identities, and arrange lesser aims around greater ones. Frankfurt’s account of caring helps explain why some commitments organize a person’s will rather than merely attracting passing preference (Frankfurt 1988). A life without any ranking at all may be psychologically impossible.

Religious traditions give this practical observation a moral interpretation. In Luther’s exposition of the First Commandment, what a person ultimately trusts can occupy the place reserved for the divine (Luther 1921). Tillich describes faith as ultimate concern and warns that finite concerns can be elevated into false ultimacy (Tillich 1957). Keller popularizes a related Christian diagnosis: good things such as success, love, or security become idols when they are asked to carry the weight of ultimate hope (Keller 2009). These claims are not merely definitions in dictionaries. They are attempts to expose self-deception and disordered allegiance.

Taken charitably, the argument can be set out this way:

1. Everyone has some concern, object, or value that takes practical priority.
2. Whatever takes practical priority performs at least some of the roles that religion can perform: it organizes conduct, identity, loyalty, sacrifice, or hope.
3. Whatever performs those roles is properly called a person’s “god” or object of worship.
4. Therefore, even a person who denies every deity still has a “god” and worships something.

The first premise is plausible, and a qualified version of the second may also be plausible. The dispute concerns the third premise and the force assigned to the conclusion. If “god” in step 3 means only “something that organizes a life”, the conclusion redescribes a psychological fact. If the word retains its ordinary metaphysical force, the premise needs evidence that functional similarity alone does not provide.

For clarity, this paper uses *God-concept* to mean a specified conception of a deity, including enough claimed properties to identify what sort of reality is being discussed. A classical-theistic, Christian, pantheistic, or process-theological God-concept may differ sharply from the others. The definition avoids treating the bare word “God” as though every participant already meant the same thing by it. The paper uses *deity* for the broader metaphysical category and *religion-like role* for an organizing function that need not be metaphysical.

The issue in one sentence

A fact about the structure of a person’s commitments is not yet a fact about what kinds of beings or realities exist. The first can be evidence for the second only when a defensible bridge connects them.

2 Four Claims, Four Evidential Burdens

The apologetic tactic gains force by presenting several claims as one. Table 1 separates them. Each row may be worth discussing, but evidence for a lower row cannot simply be carried into a higher row without an additional argument.

Table 1: Claim ladder: what is asserted and what still needs support.

Level	Claim	Relevant evidence	What does not yet follow
Practical priority	A person ranks value v above competing values in important choices.	Stable choices, accepted costs, stated commitments, and patterns of attention.	That v is sacred, worshiped, conscious, supernatural, or divine.
Religion-like role	Value v organizes identity, loyalty, hope, sacrifice, or moral orientation in a way similar to some religious commitments.	A clear account of the shared function and its importance in the person’s life.	That every religious function is present or that v belongs to the same metaphysical category as a deity.
Deity status	The object in question is a deity rather than a person, abstraction, institution, practice, or ideal.	Evidence for properties relevant to divinity, not only evidence about a person’s attitude toward the object.	That one particular God-concept is correct.
Specified theism	A stated God-concept is instantiated: for example, a creator with particular powers, intentions, and relations to the world exists.	An argument whose evidence favors that hypothesis over serious alternatives.	The remaining doctrines of any religion or the moral adequacy of the being described.

The first level concerns a relation between a person and a value. The third concerns the nature or existence of the valued object. That shift is the ontological slide. A person’s attitude can reveal much about the person while revealing little about the object’s independent nature. Intense fear of a fictional monster does not make the monster real. Lifelong devotion to justice does not make justice a conscious agent. Total loyalty to a nation does not make the nation a supernatural being.

The point is not that attitudes never provide evidence about their objects. Perception, testimony, memory, and expert judgment often do. The point is that the evidential route must be identified. In the present argument, the cited evidence consists of rank and function: what directs choices, receives sacrifice, or anchors identity. Those observations are expected whether the object is a deity, a person, an ideal, an institution, or an imagined entity. They therefore do not establish which type of object is present.

3 The Missing Bridge from Function to Identity

A functional description tells us what something does in a stated system. An identity claim tells us what the thing is. The same object can be described in both ways, but one description does not automatically entail the other. A paperweight can function as a doorstop without becoming a doorstop by nature. A constitution can function as a final civic authority without becoming a conscious lawgiver. A placebo can produce some effects also produced by an active drug without becoming pharmacologically identical to that drug.

Ryle's discussion of category mistakes is useful because it shows how familiar words can mislead when items belonging to different logical roles are treated as though they were the same kind of item (Ryle 2009). The present error is not that practical priorities and deities can never be related. It is that the relation is asserted by switching categories: evidence about a value's place in a person's motivational order is presented as evidence about metaphysical divinity.

The analogy becomes clearer when the shared function is named. A person may sacrifice for science, treat truth as nonnegotiable, and derive identity from inquiry. These facts could support the limited description "science has a religion-like organizing role in this person's life". They do not establish that science hears prayer, created the universe, issues commands, or possesses any other property in a specified God-concept. The richer the intended conclusion, the more visible the missing information becomes.

Metaphors can still be illuminating. Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphor structures thought by highlighting some similarities while leaving others out of view (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). Calling a career an "idol" may highlight sacrifice, loyalty, and the demand for validation. It may hide the difference between a social practice and a purported divine agent. Good interpretation keeps both effects visible. It asks what the comparison illuminates and which unshared properties must not be smuggled across.

Function is not identity

From " x performs one role associated with y ", it does not follow that " x is a y ". The inference needs a further rule connecting the selected role to membership in the category. Without that rule, the conclusion is metaphorical, incomplete, or invalid.

4 The Two-Horn Dilemma

The tactic now faces a dilemma determined by the meaning of its key word.

On the *functional horn*, "a person's god" is stipulated to mean whatever has practical priority or performs a chosen religion-like role. The claim that everyone has such a "god" may then be true by definition. Yet it says only that everyone has a highest concern or organizing commitment. A person can accept that conclusion while remaining an atheist, because the revised term does not assert that any deity exists. The tactic gains universality by giving up metaphysical content.

On the *metaphysical horn*, "god" means a deity or the object specified by a substantive God-concept. The conclusion is no longer trivial. Now the premises must support properties such as agency, transcendence, creative power, necessary existence, or another relevant account of divinity. Facts about a person's value-order do not supply those properties. The tactic retains theological significance only by giving up its easy proof.

The two horns are sometimes joined by equivocation. The argument begins with the functional meaning, because it makes the premise obvious: everyone organizes life around something. It ends with metaphysical or moral language, because that makes the conclusion important: the atheist supposedly

worships, practices idolatry, or cannot escape theism. The same word then performs two jobs. Its thin sense secures assent; its thick sense supplies rhetorical force.

Wittgenstein's attention to use helps explain why a private stipulation cannot settle the dispute (Wittgenstein 2009). Speakers may revise a term for a stated purpose, but the revision changes which claims follow. If "god" is detached from agency, existence, transcendence, or worship-worthiness and attached solely to rank, it no longer answers a question about a deity merely because the spelling remains unchanged.

This dilemma does not require one timeless essence of religion or one universally correct dictionary entry. It requires only stable meanings within an argument. The functional and metaphysical uses may each be legitimate in their proper setting. What is illegitimate is proving a conclusion under the first use and announcing it under the second.

5 Why Value-Ranking Does Not Favor Specified Theism

Arguments about a deity are comparative. A hypothesis gains support from evidence when that evidence is more expected if the hypothesis is true than under its serious alternatives. Swinburne explicitly treats theism as an explanatory hypothesis, while Oppy evaluates the comparative merits of theistic and naturalistic worldviews (Swinburne 2004; Oppy 2006). Their disagreements need not be settled here. Both make clear why a specified claim must do more than relabel evidence already expected on either side.

Consider the evidence that people rank values, protect identities, and organize action around major concerns. A naturalistic account predicts such behavior through ordinary features of agency, social life, attachment, culture, and limited time. Many theistic accounts also predict it. The observation is therefore common ground. Unless the theistic hypothesis predicts the evidence more strongly, the evidence does not discriminate between the hypotheses.

The same is true of misplaced priorities. Human beings can sacrifice health for status, relationships for control, or honesty for group loyalty. A Christian framework may interpret these patterns as idolatry. A secular moral psychology may interpret them as distorted preference, compulsive attachment, identity protection, or social pressure. The shared observation can matter morally while remaining neutral between the metaphysical explanations.

This creates a simple discipline for public argument. First state the God-concept being defended. Next identify the observed evidence. Then explain why that evidence would be appreciably less expected if the God-concept were not instantiated. If the evidence is merely that people care deeply about something, the third step is missing. Calling the concern a "god" does not add information to the evidence; it changes its label.

An error in a critic's values also cannot fill this gap. Suppose a critic prizes autonomy to a self-defeating degree. That might justify moral criticism of the critic. It does not make a creator more likely, validate revelation, or distinguish one theological tradition from another. A failed secular priority and a successful argument for theism are different achievements.

6 Semantic Capture and the Burden of Proof

A persuasive definition keeps the favorable or unfavorable emotional force of a familiar word while proposing a changed descriptive meaning. Stevenson analyzed how such definitions can redirect attitudes rather than merely report ordinary usage (Stevenson 1938). Calling every ultimate concern a "god" can work this way. The term brings associations of worship, authority, sin, and dependence; the revised definition requires only practical priority. The hearer is then asked to accept the associations because the thinner definition has been satisfied.

This is *semantic capture*: a disputed position is made to appear unavoidable by placing the opponent's own commitments inside the speaker's preferred vocabulary. The atheist says that no deity is believed to exist. The response is that reason, justice, or autonomy is the atheist's "god". The original metaphysical disagreement has not been answered. It has been replaced by an accusatory redescription that the critic was not given reason to accept.

The move can shift three burdens at once:

- The burden to defend a deity becomes a burden on the critic to prove an absence of strong commitments.
- The burden to identify a shared function becomes a demand that the critic deny every analogy between religious and nonreligious life.
- The burden to establish a particular God-concept becomes a general claim that no one escapes ultimacy.

Conceptual revision is not automatically dishonest. Haslanger's work on ameliorative analysis shows that philosophers can ask what a concept should do for a stated theoretical or practical purpose, not only what a word has usually meant (Haslanger 2000). A theologian may therefore openly propose that "idolatry" name any allegiance that distorts a life. The proposal should then be assessed by its purpose, clarity, and consequences. What it cannot do is inherit metaphysical conclusions from the old concept while relying on the easier application conditions of the new one.

Fair discussion requires a translation step. Replace the disputed label with the descriptive claim it is meant to express: "This commitment organizes your choices and sometimes overrides goods you also affirm." The critic can accept, deny, or qualify that claim based on evidence. If the speaker then wishes to add that the commitment is metaphysically a deity or spiritually an idol, the further premise is visible and can be debated rather than hidden in a word.

7 What the Theological Insight Can Preserve

The critique leaves a substantial internal theological insight intact. A tradition can warn its members that finite goods are being treated as ultimate. Within that tradition, "idolatry" can name a failure of trust, love, or allegiance even when no one believes the finite good is literally a supernatural agent. Luther's trust-language, Tillich's account of false ultimacy, and Keller's pastoral examples can function as mirrors for believers rather than proofs against nonbelievers.

The internal and public uses have different starting points. The internal use assumes a theological framework and asks whether a person's life is faithful to it. The public use seeks to establish the framework to someone who does not yet accept it. Evidence sufficient for diagnosis inside the first setting is not automatically evidence for the truth of the setting itself.

The distinction also restores symmetry. If finite goods can be absolutized, religious people are not exempt. A church can treat national power, institutional survival, doctrinal status, certainty, a leader, or even its own moral reputation as practically untouchable. The warning is more credible when it examines the in-group's loyalties with the same seriousness applied to an outsider's values.

Nor must every high commitment be pathological. Care is what makes sustained agency possible, and strong moral priorities can be appropriate. Truth may rightly outrank convenience; protecting a child may rightly outrank career advancement; justice may rightly demand sacrifice. The existence of a hierarchy does not show that its highest member has been deified, and the demand for sacrifice does not by itself show that the commitment is disordered. Moral criticism requires an account of what the priority damages, excludes, or falsely promises.

A disciplined theological claim can therefore say: “Within this tradition, we use idolatry as a moral category for finite allegiances that demand what should be reserved for the divine. Here is why your pattern appears to fit it.” That sentence is transparent about its framework. It may invite valuable reflection. It does not pretend that the label has already established the divine reality presupposed by the framework.

8 Four Replies

8.1 “The claim was never meant literally”

If the claim is metaphorical, the central criticism is accepted. Metaphor can compare functions without asserting identity. The remaining task is to state the limits clearly: a career may resemble religious devotion in sacrifice or identity, but that resemblance does not make the career a deity and does not show that the person accepts theism. The metaphor may still be rhetorically useful, but it cannot carry a metaphysical conclusion.

8.2 “Worship is behavior, not belief in a supernatural being”

Some definitions of worship emphasize allegiance, ritual, reverence, or enacted dependence rather than a theory about the object. On those definitions, a nonreligious person may display worship-like behavior. The result remains at the second level of the claim ladder: a religion-like role. To reach deity status, the argument still needs evidence about the object rather than only the subject’s conduct. Defining worship behaviorally does not make its object divine.

8.3 “A highest value has ultimate authority and is therefore divine”

The word “therefore” contains the disputed bridge. A value may have final practical authority for a person because that person treats it as decisive. A deity is usually claimed to possess authority that is not created merely by an individual’s ranking. Subjective finality and objective divine authority are different relations. If the claim is that every subjective finality creates divinity, that new metaphysical principle must be defended rather than assumed.

8.4 “The tactic exposes inconsistency even if it does not prove theism”

Sometimes it can. A critic may deny having ultimate commitments while behaving as though one commitment overrides all others. Revealing that tension can improve self-knowledge. It establishes, at most, an inconsistency between self-description and practical priority. It does not establish that the priority is a deity, that worship has occurred in a theological sense, or that the apologist’s specified God-concept is true. A useful psychological criticism should not be advertised as a larger metaphysical victory.

9 A Better Standard for Dialogue

Public discussion improves when three questions are asked in order.

First, *what is the descriptive claim?* Identify the value, the behavior, the time span, and the alleged role. Instead of saying “reason is your god”, say whether the person refuses every non-inferential commitment, sacrifices relationships to appearing rational, or grants evidence priority in inquiry. These are different claims, and some may be reasonable.

Second, *what does the comparison add?* If religious language highlights sacrifice, identity, or hope, name that shared feature. Also state the disanalogies. The value may lack consciousness, intentions, causal power, transcendence, or any claim to worship-worthiness. An analogy becomes more informative, not less, when its limits are explicit.

Third, *what conclusion is being offered?* A moral warning, a psychological interpretation, and an argument for a deity require different support. If the goal is to defend specified theism, offer evidence that discriminates that hypothesis from alternatives. If the goal is self-examination within a tradition, say so and invite rather than impose the framework.

These questions prevent vocabulary from doing work that belongs to evidence. They also allow genuine agreement. The theist and atheist may agree that people organize life around dominant concerns, that finite commitments can become destructive, and that self-description is sometimes unreliable. They can then locate the remaining disagreement precisely: whether any deity exists, whether a particular God-concept is coherent and true, and what evidence bears on it.

10 Conclusion

The claim that everyone has a “god” begins with an important observation: human beings care, rank, sacrifice, trust, and organize their lives. Some commitments can resemble religious devotion, and theological traditions may reasonably use the language of idolatry for internal moral criticism. The error appears when those facts are promoted into a metaphysical conclusion without a supporting bridge.

Separating the claim ladder makes the limits visible. Practical priority can support a conclusion about a person’s choices. Religion-like function can support a careful analogy. Neither, by itself, establishes that the valued object is a deity. Even establishing some deity would not yet establish a specified God-concept or the wider doctrines of a religion.

The resulting dilemma is stable. If “god” means an organizing concern, then the universal claim may be true but remains psychological and compatible with atheism. If it means a deity, the claim becomes important but needs evidence that value-ranking does not provide. Sliding between the meanings creates the appearance of proof by allowing a thin premise to produce a thick conclusion.

The remedy is not to ban metaphor or demand rigid vocabulary. It is to make the bridge, meaning, and evidential comparison explicit. Let priorities reveal what people care about. Let religious analogies illuminate selected patterns of allegiance. Let theological warnings operate honestly within their stated framework. And let claims about a deity or specified theism be defended by evidence appropriate to what they assert.

A Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

A.1 The argument in ordinary language

The paper’s central reasoning can be stated without symbols:

- P1.** A person can have a highest practical value, and that value can perform one or more roles that resemble religious commitment.
- P2.** Resembling a deity in one role is not enough to be a deity. A further premise must connect the shared role to metaphysical divinity.
- P3.** The value-hierarchy argument supplies no adequate premise of that kind.
- P4.** Therefore, evidence that everyone has a highest value does not establish that any valued object is a deity.
- P5.** Since the existence of some unspecified deity would not by itself establish a particular God-concept, the same evidence also does not establish specified theism.

P2 is the key bridge requirement. It does not assume that a deity cannot be valued most highly or play an organizing role. It says that sharing such a role is insufficient for category membership. P4 is a conclusion about what the stated evidence establishes, not a denial that a deity exists. P5 adds a

second limit: even a successful argument for one divine reality could leave open which account of that reality is correct.

A.2 Symbols

The list below defines the notation before any symbolic inference is presented.

p : any person in the group being discussed.

v : any value, object, project, person, institution, or concern that could receive practical priority.

$H(p, v)$: person p treats v as a highest practical priority.

$R(p, v)$: v performs at least one stated religion-like role for person p .

$D(v)$: v is a deity in the metaphysical sense relevant to the argument.

$G_F(p, v)$: v is person p 's "god" under the thin, functional definition.

$G_M(v)$: v is a "god" under the metaphysical definition.

T : the specified theistic hypothesis under discussion is true.

E : the observed evidence that people rank values and organize conduct around important concerns.

B : the agreed background information held fixed while E is evaluated.

Every symbol is used below. Parentheses show which person and value a relation concerns. The expression $H(p, v)$ does not say that every person has the same highest value. It says only that the named value v has that relation to the named person p .

The symbols $\forall$ and $\exists$ are quantifiers. $\forall$ means "for every"; $\exists$ means "there is at least one". The arrow $\rightarrow$ means "if, then". The double arrow $\leftrightarrow$ means "if and only if", so it states a definition or a two-way connection. The symbol $\nRightarrow$ means "does not logically guarantee".

A.3 The strongest granted premises

For the sake of argument, grant both of the following:

$$\forall p \exists v H(p, v), \quad (1)$$

$$\forall p \forall v [H(p, v) \rightarrow R(p, v)]. \quad (2)$$

Equation 1 reads: for every person, there is at least one value that the person treats as a highest practical priority. It does not require a perfectly ordered list or exactly one winner. Tied priorities are allowed.

Equation 2 reads: for every person and value, if that value is a highest priority, then it performs at least one religion-like role for that person. This premise is stronger than the paper needs and may be disputed in some cases. Granting it makes the critique more charitable: even if every highest value has a religion-like function, metaphysical divinity still does not follow.

The attempted conclusion would be:

$$\forall p \exists v [H(p, v) \wedge D(v)]. \quad (3)$$

The symbol $\wedge$ means "and". Equation 3 therefore says that every person has some highest practical value that is also a deity. Equations 1 and 2 do not entail this conclusion. They describe priorities and roles; neither says that anything belongs to the category of deity.

A.4 The missing bridge and a concrete countermodel

The argument would need a bridge such as:

$$\forall p \forall v [R(p, v) \rightarrow D(v)]. \quad (4)$$

Equation 4 says that whenever anything performs even one religion-like role for anyone, that thing is a deity. The premise is implausibly broad. A family, nation, career, political movement, or ideal can organize identity and sacrifice while remaining the kind of thing it already was.

A countermodel shows the failure in a concrete way. Imagine one person, Ada, whose highest value is justice. Let these statements be true:

$$H(\text{Ada}, \text{justice}), \quad R(\text{Ada}, \text{justice}), \quad \neg D(\text{justice}). \quad (5)$$

The symbol $\neg$ means “not”. In this model, justice guides Ada’s choices and plays an identity-forming, sacrifice-demanding role. Justice is nevertheless an ideal rather than a deity. The granted premises in Equations 1 and 2 are true, while the attempted conclusion in Equation 3 is false. One logically possible model with true premises and a false conclusion is enough to prove that the inference is invalid.

The countermodel does not prove that Ada exists or that justice is everyone’s highest value. It does not need to. A countermodel tests logical guarantee, not historical frequency. It shows that the premises can be true without the conclusion, so anyone who wants the conclusion must add and defend a further premise.

A.5 The two meanings of “god”

The functional meaning can be defined as follows:

$$G_F(p, v) \leftrightarrow R(p, v). \quad (6)$$

Equation 6 says that calling v person p ’s functional “god” means exactly that v performs the selected religion-like role for p . With this definition and Equation 2, it is easy to derive that everyone has a functional “god”:

$$\forall p \exists v G_F(p, v). \quad (7)$$

But the conclusion is thin because G_F was defined only in terms of role. It does not add deity status:

$$\forall p \exists v G_F(p, v) \not\Rightarrow \exists v D(v). \quad (8)$$

Equation 8 reads: even if everyone has something that qualifies under the functional definition, it does not logically guarantee that any deity exists.

The metaphysical meaning can instead be defined by:

$$G_M(v) \leftrightarrow D(v). \quad (9)$$

Now calling something a “god” has the intended metaphysical force. Yet Equations 1 and 2 contain no statement of $D(v)$, so they provide no route to $G_M(v)$. The functional definition makes the conclusion easy but non-metaphysical; the metaphysical definition makes the conclusion important but unsupported. Switching from G_F in a premise to G_M in a conclusion is equivocation because the same word is used for two different predicates.

A.6 Why an unspecified deity would not establish specified theism

The final step can be displayed as two non-entailments:

$$\forall p \exists v H(p, v) \not\Rightarrow \exists v D(v) \not\Rightarrow T. \quad (10)$$

The first broken arrow is the ontological slide already diagnosed. The second broken arrow marks a different gap. The statement “at least one deity exists” is weaker than a specified theistic hypothesis. It does not identify the deity’s attributes, relation to the universe, intentions, revelations, or connection to a religious tradition. Further evidence would be needed for those claims.

Equation 10 does not say that no argument could ever cross either gap. The symbol $\not\Rightarrow$ says only that the statement on the left does not guarantee the statement on the right by itself. A cosmological, moral, experiential, or revelatory argument would have to be assessed on its own premises. Value-ranking cannot silently stand in for all of them.

A.7 The discrimination test

The evidential problem can also be expressed with a likelihood ratio:

$$\text{LR}_E = \frac{\Pr(E \mid T, B)}{\Pr(E \mid \neg T, B)}. \quad (11)$$

The expression $\Pr(E \mid T, B)$ reads “the probability of observing evidence E , given that the specified theistic hypothesis T is true and background B is fixed”. The denominator asks how expected the same evidence is if T is false. The vertical bar means “given”; it does not mean “caused by”.

If the ratio is greater than one, E favors T over its negation. If it equals one, E is equally expected either way and does not discriminate. If it is less than one, E favors the negation. The ratio alone does not prove either side because prior information and the size of the ratio also matter.

For the evidence at issue—that humans rank values and organize action around serious concerns—both theistic and non-theistic accounts predict the general pattern. The paper does not assign invented numbers. It states the burden: a defender who uses E as evidence for T must explain why

$$\Pr(E \mid T, B) > \Pr(E \mid \neg T, B). \quad (12)$$

Relabeling a highest value as a “god” does not establish the inequality in Equation 12. It leaves the observed behavior unchanged and supplies no new prediction. This is why the tactic may describe human motivation while contributing no evidential advantage to specified theism.

A.8 What the formal result does and does not show

The formal reconstruction establishes a limited conclusion. Highest priority may imply a religion-like role if the terms are defined generously. A religion-like role does not, without a defended bridge, imply deity status. Deity status, even if established, does not automatically imply one specified God-concept. And evidence that both theistic and non-theistic views readily predict does not discriminate between them merely because it receives religious vocabulary.

Nothing in the reconstruction proves that $\neg T$ is true. It does not show that religious experience is worthless, that metaphors should be abandoned, or that internal theological judgments are incoherent. It shows why one route to T fails. The larger metaphysical question remains open to arguments that supply their premises, keep their meanings stable, and compare the evidence fairly.

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