



## A Critical Assessment of Positivity Theory of Faith

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### Abstract

Original Research



This paper offers a differentiated assessment of two major challenges to positivity theories of faith: the internal critique advanced by Malcolm and Scott against desire-based (DES) accounts, and the external axiological critique concerning the value of God's existence. I argue that these challenges operate at distinct levels and therefore do not carry equal force. Malcolm and Scott demonstrate that faith can persist in the absence of positive desire, inclination, or favorable evaluation toward its object. Their analyses of crisis, ambivalence, and sustained commitment devoid of a pro-attitude successfully undermine the posited conceptual necessity of desire for faith, exposing the limitations of linguistic and intuitive defenses of DES-positivity. By contrast, axiological anti-theistic arguments which often appeal to personal goods such as privacy or autonomy remain limited in scope. We contend that they are insufficient to outweigh the broad impersonal goods traditionally associated with theism, including cosmic justice, moral grounding, the absence of gratuitous evil, and objective meaning. We argue that such objections do not destabilize the structural core of positivity theory, but they at most render its evaluative dimension context-sensitive. The overall conclusion is therefore differentiated: while DES-positivity fails to be a necessary condition for faith, the axiological critique does not decisively refute the evaluative dimension of positivity theory. As an alternative, we advance the True Grit Theory as a structurally superior alternative. By grounding faith in practical steadfastness, resilience, and coordinated commitment under pressure, True Grit captures the action-guiding nature of faith without treating positive desire as conceptually essential.

### Keywords:

Faith, Positivity Theory, True Grit Theory, Desire, Positive Evaluation, Axiology of Theism.

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## Introduction

A central question in contemporary discussions of faith concerns whether faith inherently involves a positive evaluative orientation toward its object. Does having faith require that one desires, approves of, or regards the content of one's faith as good? Positivity theories answer affirmatively, maintaining that faith is not merely a cognitive commitment but also includes an evaluative or conative dimension that links belief with desirability or value.

At its core, positivity theory posits that propositional or objectual faith requires a positive evaluation of its content's truth of. Some versions emphasize the belief that the proposition's truth is good or desirable (BEL-positivity), while others ground faith in a desire or pro-attitude toward the proposition's truth (DES-positivity). Regarding the latter, Daniel Howard-Snyder has developed a paradigmatic and highly sophisticated desire-based account, distinguishing first-order desires, second-order desires, and various forms of caring.

This article argues that the current debate over positivity theory has conflated two fundamentally distinct aspects of critique. The first is an internal, conceptual critique articulated by Malcolm and Scott which targets the alleged necessity of desire within DES-positivity. The second is an external, axiological critique, which questions whether the content of theistic faith is evaluatively desirable in light of anti-theistic considerations. By separating these two levels of objection, this article clarifies the precise point of vulnerability within positivity theory.

We argue that Malcolm and Scott successfully undermine DES-positivity as a necessary condition for faith. Their arguments about crisis, evaluative withdrawal, and sustained commitment without a pro-attitude demonstrate that desire is neither conceptually required nor phenomenologically constant in instances of faith. However, we further argue that axiological anti-theism fails to destabilize the evaluative core of positivity theory in any decisive or general way. While it puts forward contestable personal considerations, it does not defeat the structural assumption that faith may involve positive appraisal.

The contribution of this article is therefore threefold. First, it offers an analysis of the both internal and external critiques of positivity theory. Second, it shows that only the former succeeds in undermining the necessity claim of DES-positivity. Third, it advances the True Grit Theory not merely as a competing proposal, but as a structurally superior alternative that better captures the practical, resilient, and action-guiding

nature of faith without relying on conative necessity.

The structure of the article is as follows. It first clarifies the architecture of positivity theory and situates Daniel Howard-Snyder's account within DES-positivity. It then examines Malcolm and Scott's critique, arguing that it successfully destabilizes the necessity of desire. Finally, it assesses the axiological challenge posed by anti-theism, demonstrating why it fail to decisively refute the evaluative dimension of faith. The article concludes by defending True Grit as a more adequate theoretical framework.

### Positivity Theory

Positivity theory in the analysis of faith rest on the question of whether faith \_ be it propositional or objectual \_ necessarily requires a positive orientation toward its content. Many contemporary philosophers accept this assumption; they hold that faith is possible only when the agent regards the truth of the faith-content as good, desirable, or valuable, or at least has some form of desire, wanting, approval, or positive evaluation toward it. This view, known as positivity theory, has become influential in recent philosophical discussions. Robert Audi states that "even if propositional faith is not reducible to a kind of belief, it is reducible to a complex of beliefs and attitudes, for example, to some degree of belief that p and a positive attitude toward p's being the case" (2011, 79). Concerning objectual faith, he adds: "Both propositional and objectual faith require a positive evaluative attitude toward their object" (2011, 67). William Alston similarly notes: "To have faith that universal democracy will eventually be firmly established is not only to believe that it will happen, but to look upon that prospect with favor; if one is strongly opposed to it, attributing faith would be inappropriate" (1996, 12). Lara Buchak (2014), Daniel Howard-Snyder (2013a), John Schellenberg (2005) and Daniel McKaughan (2018) likewise explicitly treat positivity as a necessary component of faith. Alvin Plantinga, in his account of Christian faith, maintains that one who has Christian faith " (paradigmatically) finds the whole scheme of salvation enormously attractive, delightful, moving, a source of amazed wonderment" (2000, 292).

What precisely constitute this positive attitude? Alston takes it to be "a kind of desire-like pro-attitude toward the object of faith" (Alston, 1996, 12). Audi emphasizes that faith "has motivational as well as cognitive elements," and thus faith that something will occur entails taking it to be a good thing (Audi, 2011, 67). Howard-Snyder describes this orientation as

follows: “A positive conative orientation toward the object of faith consists in being for its truth, favoring its being the case, wanting it to be so, giving its truth a positive evaluation, regarding it as good or desirable, and the like” (2013a, 48). McKaughan similarly observes that someone who has faith that God exists or that God will be faithful to His promises, “will care about whether the propositions in question are true, will want them to be the case, or will consider their truth or the obtaining of these states of affairs to be good or desirable” (2018, 198).

Across these various articulations of positivity theory, an important disagreement concerns the nature of this positive orientation — specifically, whether it is a belief or a desire. To clarify this distinction, suppose that an agent R has faith that p, or faith in s. Two forms of positivity may then be distinguished:

BEL-positivity: R believes that p is good, or that it is desirable that p be true (or believes that s is good or desirable).

DES-positivity: R desires that p or approves of p (or desires/approves of s) (Malcolm, 2022, 140).

Alston explicitly emphasizes that the positivity component required for faith has to be a desire rather than a belief; that is, faith entails wanting or approving of the truth of the relevant proposition. For other philosophers, the lines of demarcation is much less distinct. Audi holds that the positivity component required for faith consists merely in taking the object of faith to be “a good thing,” and this evaluative stance may be either a value-belief or a desire. Offering a similarly flexible account, McKaughan notes that the positive evaluation of the object of faith can be understood either as a desire for the proposition to be true or as a belief in the goodness of its truth.

Among contemporary proponents of DES-positivity, Daniel Howard-Snyder offers one of the most sophisticated and adaptable formulations. Howard-Snyder is treated here as a representative of DES-positivity views rather than the exclusive target of critique.

In response to Schellenberg’s claim that faith requires only regarding a proposition as desirable — without necessarily wanting it to be true — Howard-Snyder argues that desireless faith is impossible. He maintains that a positive evaluation cannot be psychologically sustained without at least some conative orientation toward the truth of the proposition. Thus, faith that p entails wanting p to be true, even if this wanting is weak, indirect, conflicted, or second-order (Schellenberg, 2005, p. 133).

To support this claim, Howard-Snyder appeals to three considerations:

first, that faith requires caring about the truth of the proposition, and caring is a form of desire; second, that faith plays a motivational role in action and therefore must include a conative component; and third, that disappointment upon discovering that *p* is false is intelligible only if one desired *p* to be true. To accommodate complex psychological cases, he distinguishes between first-order desire, second-order desire, and indirect desire (caring), any of which he takes to be sufficient for faith. In this way, his account represents a refined and resilient version of DES-positivity, insisting that faith necessarily contains some form of desire (Howard-Snyder, 2013a, pp. 4-6).

Howard-Snyder's account is especially instructive because it represents a highly refined contemporary defense of DES-positivity. If the necessity of desire can be undermined at this level of sophistication, then simpler or less nuanced desire-based accounts are, a fortiori, vulnerable. For this reason, examining the implications of Malcolm and Scott's critique for Howard-Snyder's model clarifies the structural scope of the objection to DES-positivity as such.

Since the present article focuses specifically on DES-positivity, the structural claim at issue must be stated in its most general form. Malcolm and Scott formulate the target position as a version of Non-Cognitive Positivity Theory (NPT), defined as follows:

Non-Cognitive Positivity Theory (NPT): Necessarily, if an agent *R* has faith that *p* (or faith in *s*), then *R* desires that *p* be true or *R* approves of its truth (or desires/approves of *s*) (Malcolm, 2022, p. 140).

Formulated in this way, the issue is not whether particular philosophers articulate desire in more complex or nuanced terms, but whether any form of conative orientation toward the truth of *p* is conceptually necessary for faith. The critique developed by Malcolm and Scott targets precisely this necessity claim.

### **Malcolm and Scott's Critique of Positivity Theory**

The following critique should be understood as targeting NPT in its general form, and thus applies to any DES-based account, including refined versions such as Howard-Snyder's.

One argument offered in defense of positivity theory appeals to the alleged linguistic infelicity of using "faith" in propositions toward which the agent has no desire or positive attitude. For example, Kaufmann claims that saying "I have faith that I will recover" is entirely natural, whereas saying "I have faith that I have cancer" violates ordinary usage. Buchak offers a similar

argument, maintaining that a proposition can be an object of faith only if the agent possesses a positive attitude toward its truth, such that one cannot appropriately say, “I have faith that you will continue smoking.”

However, closer examination reveals that these cases represent merely atypical uses of “faith”, not genuine linguistic errors. Although utterances like “I have faith that you will continue smoking” or “I have faith that I have cancer” sound strange, there is no genuine linguistic barrier to their truth, provided the speaker holds a positive attitude – even an unconventional one – toward the proposition. At most, these statements may be morally or rationally inappropriate, but they are not linguistically mistaken (Malcolm, 2022, p. 141).

Alston similarly claims that the sentence “S has faith that universal democracy will triumph, but he is strongly opposed to it” is infelicitous. Yet this infelicity is likewise not a matter of linguistic misuse but of inconsistency: the two attitudes attributed to the subject cannot both be true. Thus, Alston’s argument reveals only that the sentence describes an impossible combination of attitudes, not that the term “faith” is being misapplied (Malcolm, 2022, p. 141).

Malcolm and Scott argue that the linguistic and intuitive arguments formulated by positivity theorists fail to establish a necessary connection; Even if there is a psychological expectation linking faith with desire, this connection can be a contingent and typical correlation. They note that the fact we generally expect someone with faith to desire the truth of the relevant proposition does not demonstrate logical or epistemic necessity. Faith may be typically accompanied by a positive attitude, but this association is accidental, not essential.

Empirical studies exploring the relationship between faith and positive attitudes also indicate that this connection is causal-psychological and common, but not necessary. Although belief, hope, or motivation may play significant roles in sustaining faith, this does not entail that faith is impossible without a positive attitude (Malcolm, 2022, p. 142).

Consequently, Malcolm and Scott conclude that the linguistic and intuitive arguments advanced by positivity theorists are insufficient. The frequent coincidence of faith and positive attitudes does not show that such attitudes are conceptually or essentially required for faith.

To promote the views of Non-cognitive Positivity Theory’s opponents, one can identify cases in which faith diverges from desire or approval. A commonplace observation is that faith is sometimes accompanied by negative feelings, doubts, or anxieties concerning its content, and these can

make the maintenance of faith difficult. Contemporary literature on faith, even among some defenders of positivity theory, devotes considerable attention to how individuals sustain their faith in the face of doubt (Pojman 1986; 2007; Howard-Snyder 2013b; 2016; McKaughan 2013; 2016; Schellenberg 2005; Palmqvist, 2022)<sup>1</sup>. Historical and theological accounts similarly show that faith has always been open to doubt, and upholding faith while feeling doubt has been sometimes regarded as a virtue. However the negative emotions associated with faith extend far beyond doubt about truth; religious faith may be accompanied by despair, suffering, anger, feelings of abandonment, sadness, or dark nights of the soul. McKaughan (McKaughan 2013; 2018) highlights that such experiences were extensively documented in the life of Mother Teresa. Her personal writings describe prolonged periods of darkness, an absence of any sense of God's presence, and the pain of longing for Him. These examples reveal that during a crisis of faith, positive attitudes toward the content of faith can be temporarily set aside and replaced by negative feelings or evaluations (McKaughan 2013; 2018). In such situations, insisting that a positive attitude is a necessary condition for faith is inconsistent with the experiential reality of crises of faith (Malcolm, 2022, p. 142).

Moreover, crises of faith are not limited to religious contexts. One may retain faith in a person who behaves in frustrating or self-destructive ways, developing feelings of anger or disappointment toward them, yet without losing faith.

The central problem with NPT is that during such crises, faith can be detached, even if only temporarily, from positive non-cognitive attitudes and positive evaluative judgments without thereby being lost. In many cases, it is precisely the resoluteness or steadfastness of the faith that enables the agent to survive the crisis. This does not demonstrate an absolute lack of connection between faith and positive attitudes; rather, it shows that faith is neither inherently nor necessarily positive, nor is it always accompanied by desire or approval.

If propositional or objectual faith can persist without positive attitudes in crisis situations, it raises the question of whether such a separation is possible in ordinary circumstances? The example of Ellis and Thomas illustrates this possibility. Ellis is traveling to London, and his friend Thomas is scheduled to pick him up from the airport. Ellis trusts Thomas's

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1. These accounts represent a new approach to faith, arguing that while belief is not compatible with doubt, faith can coexist with doubt. They are called non-doxastic accounts of faith, in contrast to doxastic accounts, which hold that faith does not necessarily entail belief.

reliability and has faith that he will arrive on time. However, during the flight, Ellis discovers a serious flaw in his academic presentation and suddenly wishes that Thomas would arrive late so that he might miss his presentation slot. In this scenario, Ellis still has faith that Thomas will arrive on time, he still expects him, has no backup plan, and continues to rely on him—yet instead of wanting Thomas to be punctual, he now wishes he would \*not\* be. If NPT were correct, Ellis would have lost his faith in Thomas, but clearly he has not. He has merely changed his evaluation regarding the desirability of Thomas’s punctuality, while his faith remains intact (Malcolm, 2022, p. 143).

A similar example concerns Martha, who has faith that God predestines some individuals to salvation and others to damnation. She neither claims that this doctrine is good, nor regards it as desirable, nor desires its truth. Her emotional response is closer to dread and worry. Nevertheless, her faith is neither in crisis nor weakened; she has never regarded the doctrine positively but has accepted it as a mysterious, inscrutable facet of religious reality, beyond her personal evaluative judgment. She even deliberately refrains from evaluating it, considering such a judgment either pointless or presumptuous. Her faith is thus grounded in commitment and acceptance, not in desire or approval (Malcolm, 2022, p. 144).

Advancing an alternative NPT account of faith, Howard-Snyder contends that it is possible for faith to be accompanied by an agent’s caring about the object of faith and by their disposition to feel disappointment if the content of their faith turns out to be false. Howard-Snyder argues that faith cannot exist without “caring” and without an “openness to disappointment” regarding its content. Specifically, he maintains that a person can have faith that *p* only if, upon discovering that *p* is false, they would have at least some tendency toward disappointment; for faith requires caring, and caring, in turn, entails a disposition toward disappointment (Howard-Snyder, 2013b, p. 360).

To illustrate the limitations of this view, consider a father has faith that his child will win a race. If the child instead receives a better prize for second place, the father may feel no disappointment whatsoever, even though his faith was fully intact. Or consider a fan who has faith that his favorite football team will avoid relegation, but when the team unexpectedly performs far better and is promoted to a higher league, the fan experiences joy, not disappointment. In these cases, faith is present without any “accompanying readiness for disappointment.” These examples show that a disposition toward disappointment is neither a necessary condition for faith nor its constant accompaniment.

Nevertheless, one may grant that there is a real connection between faith and caring: an agent with faith typically cares about the content of their faith, because that content plays a role in their practical life. The True Grit Theory, however, adequately account for this link. On this view, faith involves resolute practical commitment and planning aligned with its content, and this practical commitment naturally generates caring. Therefore, neither “caring” nor a “readiness for disappointment” constitutes an independent component of faith, nor do they show that faith requires an additional non-cognitive element (Malcolm, 2022, p. 145).

Malcolm and Scott illustrate the insufficiency of any account of faith that relies on a positive attitude toward the content of faith. First, they point to two examples:

1. Peter’s faith regarding Franz’s quitting or continuing smoking:

Example: “Peter has faith that Franz will quit smoking.”

Example: “Peter has faith that Franz will continue smoking.”

According to positivity theory, one cannot adequately explain the difference between these two forms of faith, since the agent should have positive attitudes toward the outcome; that is, they should have faith in outcomes that are regarded as good or desirable. Suppose Peter has a positive attitude toward Franz’s continuing to smoke—he might even want Franz to become ill, and continued smoking would increase the likelihood of that outcome. Yet even under these conditions, asserting that Peter “has faith” that Franz will continue to smoke still seems strange and counterintuitive. The reason is that a mere positive attitude or desire cannot explain why some propositions intuitively qualify as appropriate objects of faith while others do not.

2. Faith in one’s own quitting or continuing to smoke:

Example: “I have faith that I will quit smoking.”

Example: “I have faith that I will continue smoking.”

Here too, positivity theory provides no convincing explanation, since desiring to keep smoking or enjoying the habit is a perfectly ordinary and positive attitude. Yet, the intuitive contrast between these two kinds of faith cannot be accounted for merely by appealing to the presence of a positive attitude (Malcolm, 2022, p. 146).

In the end, these examples show that positivity theory fails to explain

the intuitive differences among various instances of faith, because merely possessing a positive attitude toward an object is insufficient for identifying faith; some propositions, even when accompanied by a positive attitude, still strike us as unusual or inappropriate objects of faith. This prepares the way for the introduction of the True Grit Theory, which shifts the focus from positive attitudes to the agent's will and steadfast commitment in the face of obstacles and pressures.

Malcolm and Scott present the True Grit Theory as an alternative to positivity theory. This Theory emphasizes that the core of faith lies not in positive attitudes or accompanying feelings, but in the agent's practical commitment and steadfast resolve with respect to the content of faith. In other words, to have faith is to adopt a practical plan aligned with the content of faith and to carry out this plan with stability and resilience against obstacles and counter-pressures.

The previously discussed examples are now reconsidered in light of the True Grit Theory:

1. Peter's faith in Franz's continued smoking: Even if Peter has a positive attitude, such faith remains odd. The True Grit Theory explains this by noting that if Peter genuinely had faith, this would mean he is resolutely committed to this expectation and maintains it despite counterevidence or pressures. The strangeness of the case arises from the fact that steadfast commitment toward such a proposition is itself unusual.

2. Faith in one's own quitting or continuing to smoke: having faith that one will quit smoking requires resistance to temptations, sustained effort against past patterns, and practical perseverance, whereas having faith that one will continue to smoke typically requires no resolve. Thus, it is the True Grit Theory, not positivity theory, that successfully accounts for the intuitive difference.

3. Faith in surviving or dying from an illness: Patients who have faith that they will survive a severe illness show strong resolve and practical resistance in the face of negative predictions. Conversely, one's having faith that they will die generally requires no such perseverance. Even pessimistic individuals who try to cling to a negative expectation would count as having genuine faith only if this commitment is steadfast and resolute (Malcolm, 2022, pp. 146-147).

## **The Axiology of Theism Critique**

The relevance of axiological debates to positivity theory can now be made

explicit. Positivity theories maintain that faith necessarily involves a positive evaluation of its content—namely, that the truth of the relevant proposition is necessarily regarded as good, desirable, or worthy of approval. Such an evaluation, however, appears to presuppose that the content of faith possesses genuine value. If the existence of God were shown to diminish the overall value of the world, or to undermine goods central to human flourishing, then the normative basis for positively evaluating that content would be destabilized. In that case, the requirement imposed by positivity theory would either become irrational or fail to be generally satisfiable. Axiological anti-theism, therefore, poses a potential challenge not merely to the desirability of theism, but to the structural assumptions underlying positivity accounts of faith. The challenge can be formulated more explicitly as follows:

- 1) Positivity theory entails that faith requires a positive evaluation of its content.
- 2) A positive evaluation of the content of faith presupposes that the content possesses genuine or sufficient value.
- 3) If the existence of God lacks such value—or diminishes overall value—then a positive evaluation of that content is not normatively warranted.
- 4) Therefore, if axiological anti-theism is correct, the necessity claim of positivity theory is undermined.

Understood in this light, axiological anti-theism does not merely dispute the desirability of theism; it threatens the evaluative foundation upon which positivity accounts of faith are constructed.

Up to now, most attention in the philosophy of religion has been devoted to the question of how faith can remain resilient in the face of epistemic counter-evidence, that is, evidence indicating that the propositional content of faith is false. But a far less explored question is this: what becomes of faith if there is evidence suggesting that the content of faith is not good, or is not valuable or desirable? A person may come to doubt their religious faith not because they doubt God's existence, but because they doubt whether God's existence is valuable, good, desirable, or worthy of commitment.

This brings to the fore the axiology of theism: the question of whether God's existence would make the world better, worse, or leaves its value unchanged. This approach invites us to consider a range of evaluative questions prior to addressing the metaphysical question "Does God exist?"

Questions such as “Is a world with God better than a world without God?” or “Should we want God to exist?” carry significant existential and practical weight. However, they have historically received remarkably little philosophical attention. Indeed, individuals frequently adopt doxastic stances toward God’s existence while implicitly assuming answers to these axiological questions. In this regard, Kahane’s work makes an important contribution by directing philosophical focus toward a neglected but fundamental inquiry: What axiological difference would God’s existence make, both for the world as a whole and for its inhabitants (Kraay, 2013, pp. 157-178)?

Proponents of the value of God’s existence argue that, regardless of the question of whether God exists, the existence of God would be intrinsically positive: a world with God would possess deeper meaning, moral purpose, and a value-laden structure. God’s existence, they maintain, carries substantial positive value that enhances the value of the world as a whole. Thus, only with the existence of a God who is the source of value and meaning can human life be genuinely meaningful<sup>1</sup> (Pakdel 2024; Loughheed 2021).

By contrast, philosophers such as Guy Kahane – drawing upon Thomas Nagel’s thought – present a critical perspective regarding the value of God’s existence. They argue that if God’s existence would demonstrably diminish the value of the world in some ways – particularly from the standpoint of personal, lived experience – then an anti-theistic axiological position is both coherent and defensible (Kahane 2011, p. 674). Therefore, opposing the value of God’s existence does not amount to atheism. Whether the anti-axiological stance toward God’s existence is coherent depends on whether its defenders can show how and in what ways God’s existence would worsen the world. The central claim of opponents of divine value is that God’s existence would, in several predominantly personal respects, make the world worse (Kahane 2012).

Possible responses to the axiological question regarding God include the following:

Pro-theism: God’s existence increases the overall value of the world.

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1. There is a concern about the axiological question regarding God related to metaphysical possibility. If God exists necessarily, then God exists in all possible worlds, making a value comparison between a world with God and one without seem contradictory or impossible. To resolve this, one can instead compare epistemically possible worlds—worlds that are conceivable from the standpoint of our knowledge. Following Chalmers, an epistemic possible world is one that a person can coherently consider possible given their knowledge. Thus, the axiological question about God can be meaningfully addressed by comparing an epistemically possible world with God to one without, even if the latter is metaphysically impossible (Loughheed 2021: 3-4).

Anti-theism: God's existence decreases the overall value of the world.

Axiological Agnosticism: The question is answerable in principle, but we should currently suspend judgment.

These responses can be further divided along two dimensions. First, they may be personal (concerning the impact of God's existence on individuals) or impersonal (concerning the value of the world with or without God independently of individuals). Second, they may be narrow judgments (focusing on a specific feature of theism or atheism) or broad judgments (evaluating the overall axiological profile of theism or atheism) (Lougheed 2021, pp. 5-6).

### **Defenses of Pro-theism**

1. The Infinite Value of Any God-Including World: Classical theism holds that God is infinitely valuable; thus any world containing God has infinite value. This supports wide, impersonal pro-theism, though it faces the worry that worlds with vastly different amounts of suffering would have the same value.

2. The Added Value of Perfect Moral Agents: Another defense claims that perfectly good moral agents, like God, always contribute positive value to any state of affairs in which they exist. Unlike the "infinite value" argument, it does not require that all God-including worlds have equal value; but it only argues that God's existence always raises a world's value.

3. The Absence of Gratuitous Evil: A further argument maintains that, if theism is true, there is no gratuitous evil: every instance of evil either contributes to some greater good or prevents some greater evil. This is taken to be a significant theistic good that weakens wide-ranging anti-theism, though some deny that gratuitous evil is incompatible with God's existence.

4. Other Theistic Goods: Additional theistic goods include cosmic justice, an afterlife, and objective foundations for morality and meaning. These are thought to enhance the value of a theistic world, even though critics argue that for certain individuals, God's existence might undermine personal meaning (Lougheed, 2021, pp. 6-7).

### **Defenses of Anti-theism**

The central claim of anti-theists is that the existence of God makes the world worse in certain primarily personal respects. On this basis, two major

arguments have been developed:

### **1. The Meaningful Life Argument**

The Meaningful Life Argument, originally formulated by Guy Kahane and later developed by Myron A. Penner, defends narrow personal anti-theism. This argument highlights that some individuals—due to their personal values and life-projects—may rationally prefer that God does not exist. The reason is that God’s existence may undermine or render meaningless certain projects or values that are fundamental to an individual’s sense of meaning.

Kahane presents several examples of personal values that might be jeopardized by God’s existence – values such as independence, privacy, autonomy, self-understanding, and solitude. If these values are essential to an individual’s meaningful life, and if the existence of God would make their realization impossible or incoherent, then it is rational for such a person to prefer that God does not exist. In this case, one may coherently regard God’s existence as disvaluable without endorsing global anti-theism or the claim that God’s existence makes the world worse simpliciter.

Thus, this argument belongs to narrow personal anti-theism because it concerns only the standpoint of particular individuals with specific values; it does not assert that God’s existence is bad for the world as a whole. Kahane emphasizes that such anti-theism neither denies God’s existence nor claims that God’s existence is globally bad. Rather, it posits that, for some individuals, God’s existence is detrimental in virtue of their personal values and projects (Kahane, 2011, p. 691).

### **2. Goods Unrelated to the Meaningfulness of Life**

A second line of argument appeals to goods that are valuable independently of life’s meaningfulness – goods whose worth does not depend on the individual’s pursuit of meaning but which nonetheless contribute to the overall value of the world. Anti-theists claim that certain goods of this nature would be impossible or significantly diminished if God existed.

One prominent example is privacy. Anti-theists argue that in a world where God exists, humans cannot escape the permanent presence and epistemic access of an omniscient deity; the most intimate thoughts, emotions, and inner attitudes cannot remain truly private. Since privacy is an undisputed and significant good, and since God’s existence would preclude full privacy, this provides a reason to regard God’s existence as

disvaluable in at least some respects.

Beyond privacy, opponents of the value of God's existence mention other goods, such as solving problems without divine intervention or possessing the courage to confront the unknown. These are valuable, autonomy-enhancing activities that would not be fully possible if God's presence permeated every aspect of life. According to anti-theists, these goods provide further grounds for rejecting the claim that God's existence is valuable (Lougheed, 2021, p. 9).

Whether this axiological challenge ultimately succeeds against Positivity Theory requires careful assessment.

## **Review of Critiques:**

### **1. Examining the Critique of Positivity Theory**

Malcolm and Scott provide a strong and coherent critique of positivity theories, showing that faith can persist without a positive desire or favorable evaluation toward the object of faith, thereby challenging the supposed "necessity of desire." Their linguistic critique is precise and well-founded, illustrating that the examples offered by positivists are unusual rather than genuine conceptual errors. The intuitive and psychological critiques are similarly compelling: faith often endures even in crises or when the believer does not desire the outcome, placing substantial pressure on the conceptual claim that desire is essential for faith.

The examples discussed, such as having faith in quitting or continuing smoking, or faith in recovery or decline during illness, further illustrate the limitations of Positivity Theory. Merely possessing a positive attitude or desire cannot account for the nuanced differences between types of faith. In contrast, True Grit Theory explains these differences by appealing to steadfastness, practical commitment, and resilience in the face of obstacles, which better correspond to the lived experience of faith. Cases that initially seem strange, such as having faith that someone will continue smoking, become intelligible when analyzed through the lens of True Grit Theory: the strangeness lies not in the absence of a positive attitude, but in the unusual nature of maintaining a resolute, sustained practical commitment.

Consider the example of a student, Sara, hoping to pass a PhD entrance exam. According to Positivity Theory, Sara has faith that she will pass because of her positive attitude or strong desire toward the outcome:

1. She imagines being admitted to her desired university.
2. She feels excitement and anticipates success.

3. She regards the result as valuable and desirable.

However, the Limitations are as follows:

1. Thousands of candidates have positive attitudes but lack genuine faith.
2. Sara could have a positive attitude yet abandon her efforts at the first difficulty or negative prediction.
3. Someone might even have a positive emotional stance toward not being admitted (e.g., fearing financial strain) but still have faith that they will pass. Simply having a positive attitude is neither a reliable nor a sufficient criterion for faith.

According to True Grit Theory, Sara genuinely has faith that she will pass only if:

1. Her practical plan is aligned with the proposition that she will succeed.
2. She remains steadfast and resilient in the face of pressures, negative evidence, and difficulties.

Thus, She shows the following behaviors:

1. Even after poor results on practice exams, she does not abandon her study plan.
2. When others claim admission is unlikely, she does not give up.
3. When a family crisis interrupts her schedule, she continues studying.
4. Even when she feels her chances are low, she maintains her practical commitment.

Practical resilience in the face of difficulty constitutes genuine faith. Sara may lack positive feelings or an encouraging outlook, yet if she persists with practical steadfastness, she truly has faith. Faith, according to the True Grit Theory, consists of practical steadfastness and coordinated plan, rather than merely a positive attitude or emotion. Positivity Theory ties faith to positive feelings or desires, which is insufficient; the True Grit Theory emphasizes action, resilience, and enduring commitment as the core of genuine faith.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Maria Waggoner argues that there is an explanatory gap why one has gritty faith. To fill this gap, a pro-attitude must also be to underide one's grit. This conative attitude can be, for instance, love of one's beloved, looking positively upon identifying with one's group, or looking negatively upon leaving one's group. One's grit (Waggoner, 2025, pp. 228-234).

Despite its sophistication, Howard-Snyder's account ultimately remains committed to a structural thesis: that some form of conative orientation toward the truth of *p* is necessary for faith. The central question, therefore, is not whether desire can take complex or attenuated forms, but whether any conative condition is conceptually required. Malcolm and Scott's cases of faith in the absence of desire – including instances of crisis, ambivalence, or sustained commitment under evaluative withdrawal – directly challenge this necessity claim. If an agent can persist in an action-guiding commitment to *p* while lacking even an indirect or second-order desire for *p*'s truth, then the expansion of the concept of desire to include caring or “wanting to want” risks becoming circular: faith is said to require desire, yet desire is redefined to track whatever motivational stability faith already exhibits. In that case, the explanatory direction reverses: steadfast commitment explains the psychological phenomena, not a conative orientation. Consequently, the force of Malcolm and Scott's critique extends to Howard-Snyder's refined model as well, for the issue is not the complexity of desire, but its alleged necessity.

Nevertheless, Malcolm and Scott's critique has limitations. Howard-Snyder's flexible, desire-based accounts, – incorporating indirect desires, second-order desires, caring, and a readiness for disappointment – still explain many forms of faith. Moreover, the True Grit Theory remains underdeveloped regarding its practical criteria and may struggle with passive or contemplative forms of faith. While Malcolm and Scott successfully challenge the necessity of desire, the motivational and affective role of desire in many types of faith preserves some explanatory value for positivity theories.

I conclude that Malcolm and Scott successfully undermine the necessity claim central to DES-positivity. The expansion of “desire” to encompass caring, second-order wanting, or attenuated conative states ultimately fails to establish that any such orientation is conceptually required for faith. What explains the relevant phenomena is not desire in any robust sense, but practical steadfastness and coordinated commitment in the face of pressure. For this reason, I argued that True Grit provides a conceptually superior account of the structure of faith, whereas DES-positivity cannot sustain its claim to necessity, even in its most refined forms.

## **2. Examining the Critique of the Axiology of Theism**

The axiological challenge to positivity proceeds differently. Instead of questioning the role of desire in faith, it targets the evaluative status of the content of religious belief itself – namely, the value of God's existence. If

God's existence were shown to diminish the value of the world, then the claim that faith involves a positive evaluation of its content would be destabilized.

The arguments offered by defenders of pro-theism are generally broad and impersonal. They appear philosophically well-grounded, especially when one assumes that God exists and possesses the attributes of a maximally perfect being. Goods such as cosmic justice, objective morality, objective meaning, and an afterlife provide strong reasons for thinking that God's existence increases the value of the world. Even when gratuitous evil is taken into account, notions such as the "absence of gratuitous evil" and "divine goodness" can provide further justification for this view.

By contrast, the arguments advanced by axiological anti-theists emphasize the dissatisfaction of personal life or the frustration of personal, meaningful projects in the presence of God. From a narrow and personal perspective, the arguments of Kahane and Penner may be compelling for certain individuals; however, when the focus shifts to the value of the world as a whole or to impersonal goods, goods unrelated to meaning, such as privacy or the courage to confront the unknown, are generally not weighty or wide-ranging enough to outweigh theistic goods.

Kahane's arguments, both for narrow impersonal anti-theism and for wide personal anti-theism, face significant conceptual and argumentative obstacles. As Kraay (2013) argues, the transition from narrow to wide versions of anti-theism requires much more detailed clarification and justification, and Kahane's current arguments are not sufficient to support such a move.

A primary weakness in Kahane's argument is his failure to specify which kinds of meaning-conferring values he believes would be undermined by God's existence. Theories of life's meaning typically distinguish between subjective and objective accounts. Subjective accounts, although relying on individual preference and experience to determine meaning, lack reliable discriminatory power due to the high likelihood of error in identifying what genuinely confers meaning. On such views, anything that seems meaningful to a person must be permitted, and anything that obstructs it must be rejected. Consequently, in the case of a child abuser who claims to find meaning in harming children and insists that God's existence thwarts this meaning, the subjective view offers no standard by which to reject this claim. Because of this deficiency, contemporary theories of meaning have increasingly moved toward objective accounts. Objective views ground meaningfulness in factors that are independent of the individual and possess intrinsic value, thereby

preserving normative discrimination and evaluative authority. For this reason, the predominant approach in the literature on meaning is the objective view.

Accordingly, Kahane's argument remains incomplete, as it is silent on the specific type of meaning-conferring values at stake. Moreover, because subjective considerations play a significant, yet fallible, role in identifying objective values, the Meaningful Life Argument against the value of God's existence rests on an unstable basis. On this view, denying the value of God's existence is not justified. Its scope is also limited, since the argument applies only to individuals with highly specific values or life projects, and thus cannot serve as a general defense of anti-theism (Pakdel, 2024).

Regarding arguments from non-meaning-related goods, such as privacy, it is unclear whether these goods, taken alone, are sufficiently weighty to outweigh the theistic goods in an overall axiological assessment. In other words, without anchoring them in a broader account of meaning or value, it remains doubtful whether such goods can lower the total value of the world (Lougheed 2021, pp. 8-9).

Furthermore, the very concept of privacy is violated only when a conscious agent intrudes unjustifiably upon a domain that is, by its nature, defined in contrast to the possibility of such intrusion. The conceptual presupposition of privacy is thus the existence of a "potentially intrusive other." However, in relation to God, this presupposition does not hold: God is neither ontologically comparable to human beings nor capable of wrongdoing, misuse, or violation. Thus, conceptually, God's existence cannot constitute a violation of privacy.

Second, the violation of privacy requires the experiential presence of another party and the possibility of that party exerting control or dominance over an individual. Yet, according to the doctrine of divine hiddenness, God is not experientially present in the world in a way that would render Him a confronting "other." Therefore, the experiential condition necessary for privacy violation is not met.

Third, the notion of individual autonomy is meaningful only in relation to agents capable of restricting a person's freedom. However, a being who is morally perfect cannot possess a will that conflicts with or threatens human freedom. Thus, appeals to individual autonomy also fail to diminish the value of God's existence.

Consequently, since the three core elements required for a breach of privacy, (1) a potentially intrusive agent, (2) an experientially present other, and (3) the possibility of restricting autonomy are all absent in the

human-divine relationship, arguments based on privacy or autonomy cannot successfully establish personal anti-theism and are conceptually unsound.

From the standpoint of assessing the value of the world as a whole, pro-theistic arguments appear stronger and more justified, as they appeal to global and impersonal goods whose impact is broad, structural, and far-reaching. Anti-theism retains greater plausibility at the personal and relative level, where specific individuals, due to their particular projects and values, may rationally prefer a godless world: however, it cannot exert the same general, comprehensive, or decisive influence on the overall axiological assessment of the world.

Accordingly, axiological anti-theism remains limited in scope and insufficiently robust to overturn the broader evaluative case for theism. Most importantly for the present discussion, these objections fail to undermine the core assumption shared by positivity theories: that faith may involve a positive evaluation of its content. At most, axiological disagreement shows that such an evaluation is contestable in certain personal contexts. It does not demonstrate that the evaluative dimension of faith is conceptually incoherent or philosophically indefensible.

I therefore conclude that axiological anti-theism fails to undermine the structural core of Positivity Theory. While it highlights genuine evaluative disagreements at the personal level, it does not establish that the content of theism lacks sufficient objective or impersonal goods to ground a positive evaluation. Consequently, it does not defeat the necessity claim at the heart of DES-positivity. At most, it makes it clear that positivity may be context-sensitive in its application, not that it is conceptually incoherent or philosophically indefensible.

## **Conclusion**

This article has argued that the debate over Positivity Theory must be carefully differentiated. Two distinct challenges were examined: the internal critique developed by Malcolm and Scott against desire-based (DES) accounts of faith, and the external axiological critique concerning the value of God's existence. While both objections raise important questions, they do not carry equal philosophical force.

I have argued that the first challenge succeeds. Malcolm and Scott demonstrate that faith can persist in the absence of positive desire, favorable evaluation, or stable pro-attitudes toward its content. Cases involving crises of

faith and evaluative ambivalence show that desire is neither conceptually necessary nor phenomenologically constant in faith. Attempts to preserve DES-positivity by expanding the notion of desire fail to secure the necessity claim upon which the theory depends. For this reason, DES-positivity cannot be sustained as a necessary condition of faith.

By contrast, the axiological critique does not destabilize Positivity Theory at its structural core. Although anti-theistic arguments appeal to personal goods such as privacy or autonomy, these considerations remain limited in scope and insufficient to outweigh the broader impersonal goods traditionally associated with theism. I therefore conclude that axiological anti-theism does not undermine the evaluative dimension of faith in any decisive or general way. It reveals contestability at the level of personal preference, but not conceptual incoherence.

The overall conclusion is thus clear: DES-based Positivity Theory fails because it misidentifies a contingent psychological accompaniment of faith as a conceptual necessity. In its place, I argue that the True Grit Theory provides a more adequate alternative. By grounding faith in practical steadfastness, resilience, and coordinated commitment under pressure, True Grit captures the action-guiding structure of faith without tying it to a positive desire or an evaluative orientation. Positive attitudes may often accompany faith, but they are not constitutive of it. A satisfactory account of faith should therefore abandon DES-positivity in favor of a True Grit framework, which more accurately reflects the enduring and commitment-based nature of faith.

#### ▣ **Conflict of Interest**

- ▣ The authors declare no competing interests.

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