

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Private evidence for atheism

Aaron Bartolome 

College of DuPage, 425 Fawell Blvd., Glen Ellyn, IL 60137, USA
Email: bartolomea224@cod.edu

(Received 26 December 2021; revised 21 March 2022; accepted 22 March 2022; first published online 27 April 2022)

Abstract

This article presents an argument for atheism that contains a premise stated from the first-person perspective and that is intended to rationally persuade people who satisfy certain conditions. The argument also contains a premise about what God would do, if God existed, that is acceptable to theists and is affirmed in some major monotheistic religious traditions. This article explains how the argument differs from some other familiar arguments for atheism and then discusses some critical responses to it.

Keywords: atheism; divine hiddenness; divine absence; religious epistemology

Introduction

This article explores some ways of acquiring strong private evidence for atheism. Familiar arguments for atheism contain only premises stated from the third-person perspective, and hence, are intended to rationally persuade anyone who reflects on them. They typically contain at least one premise, moreover, that is clearly unacceptable to theists. This article, however, will present an argument for atheism that contains a premise stated from the first-person singular perspective. The argument is intended to rationally persuade only those for whom this crucial premise is true. It also contains a premise about what God would do, if God existed, that is acceptable to many theists. Indeed, the truth of this premise, or the correctness of this expectation regarding God, has recently been defended by philosophers who are theists, and it is affirmed in some major monotheistic religious traditions. This article explains how the argument differs from some other arguments for atheism and from some other problems for theists, and then discusses some critical responses to it.

This article will focus on a particular kind of deity. It makes a semantic decision to use the term ‘God’ in a way that implies the following. An object is God only if it is a person or very much like a person, and only if it is worthy of worship, morally perfect, and perfectly (or unsurpassably) loving. A person is perfectly loving, moreover, only if for any person *S*, they love *S*, and despite being omnipotent and omniscient, or despite being almighty and all-wise, could not love *S* more than they actually do. Note that there is a certain kind of asymmetry as regards evidence for (and against) the reality of God. Suppose that a person has a justified belief that a particular proposition *P* is true if they have sufficient evidence for the truth of *P* and if their belief that *P* is based in an appropriate way on that evidence. In order to have a justified belief that God exists, one needs evidence for the reality of a

person who is perfectly loving towards everyone. In order to have a justified belief that God does not exist, on the other hand, one only needs evidence for the existence of at least one person who is not the object of perfect divine love. Hence, it is *prima facie* easier to have evidence for atheism (that is, the view that God does not exist) than it is to have evidence for theism (that is, the view that God exists).

We must avoid the temptation to look for evidence for (or against) the reality of God before carefully examining our assumptions about what God would (and would not) do, and consequently, about what kind of relevant evidence would be available, if God existed. It would be a mistake, for example, to think that atheism is probably true just because not everyone experiences pleasure at all times or just because a Zeus-like figure has not come down from the heavens and said, 'I most certainly do exist!' We do not have any good arguments for the views that if God existed, then everyone would experience pleasure at all times, or that if God existed, then a Zeus-like figure would have come down from the heavens and revealed himself, in an obvious way, to us. There is debate among philosophers about whether it is reasonable to have some other expectations regarding God, such as the expectation that God, if God existed, would not permit people to suffer from horrendous evil or from the kind of suffering that makes it reasonably difficult for us to see how the sufferer's life can be an overall good to them (and/or be positively meaningful). This article, however, will focus on some other expectations regarding God, expectations that can be used in first-person arguments for atheism that have not received as much attention among philosophers.

Human expectations regarding God

Let us consider some expectations regarding what God would (and would not) do, if God existed, that have been defended by philosophers such as Eleonore Stump, J. L. Schellenberg, and Paul Moser. These expectations or claims are important for our purposes in this article because they can be used by some people who satisfy certain conditions to construct good or rationally persuasive first-person arguments for atheism. The first set of expectations concerns experiencing or sensing the loving and consoling personal presence of God in times of intense suffering and heartbreak. Stump (2010), following Aquinas, claims that to love another person is to have two interconnected desires regarding them, namely, the desire for what is truly good or best for the beloved, and the desire for an appropriate kind of union with, and closeness to, them. Given the way in which we are choosing to use term 'God', this account of love implies that God, if God exists, has these desires for everyone. Stump aims to describe an epistemically possible world at which God loves [mentally fully functioning adult] human beings and yet permits them to experience the kind of suffering that we observe in the actual world. This description is part of her attempt to refute arguments from evil, that is, arguments for atheism that appeal to the existence, magnitude, duration, and distribution of evil in the world. This article will interpret Stump to be describing how God would act in the world, if God existed. On this interpretation, if God existed, then God would permit instances of suffering only if these instances were an essential part of the best means to eventual interpersonal union between the sufferer and God; this union would itself be part of what is best for human beings. God would make God's personal presence and the consolation it brings available to sufferers who are open to it. God would make the joy that comes from shared attention with God and from closeness to God available to sufferers who are willing to receive it. And God would aim to remove guilt and shame from those who turn to God in faith and love.

The second set of expectations regarding God concerns participating in a positive personal relationship with God. Schellenberg (2015) claims that if an unsurpassably loving

god existed, then this god would seek to express benevolence towards people within the context of a particular kind of interpersonal relationship, namely, a conscious and reciprocal relationship that is positively meaningful, allows for deep sharing, and is valued for its own sake. The term 'conscious' here is important. One is in a conscious relationship with another person only if one recognizes oneself to be in that relationship. And one cannot recognize this, Schellenberg claims, unless one believes that the other person exists. Since it is rational, or in some sense correct, to will the satisfaction of all the conditions necessary for the realization of some state of affairs that one wills, if God existed, then God would arrange things so that every person who is 'non-resistant', that is, who is sufficiently open to a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship with God, believes that God exists. The motivating idea is that the best kinds of love relationships – such as very good and loving relationships between parents and children, marriage partners, siblings, and friends – are analogous to, or not radically different from, the kind of relationship that God, if God existed, would seek to have with human beings. Schellenberg agrees with Robert Adams who says that it would be an 'abuse' of the word 'love' to say that God has unsurpassable love for a human person but does not aim at having a personal relationship with them.

Schellenberg goes on to argue that, given the aforementioned views about love and the best kinds of personal relationships, the existence of non-resistant non-belief – that is, non-belief in relation to the proposition that God exists – is strong evidence for atheism. If God exists, then there will never be a time at which the 'door' to a relationship with God is closed, or a time at which a non-resistant person fails to believe that God exists. Moser and Stump, however, would say that Schellenberg fails to acknowledge some key disanalogies between human parents and God. The differences in power, knowledge, and goodness between human beings and God, if God existed, would be vast. Our inability to think of a good reason that a loving mother could have for ignoring her small child's repeated calls for her, especially when the child is miserable and alone, for example, might be good evidence for the view that there is no such reason. (On this analogy, see Schellenberg's contribution in Schellenberg & Moser (2004).) But our inability to see a morally sufficient reason that God could have for permitting temporary non-resistant non-belief, or for not providing an immediate or 'quick' response to every non-resistant seeker of God, is not, on the other hand, good evidence for the view that there is no such reason. (For a defence of this view, see Moser's contribution in Schellenberg & Moser (2004).)

A theist can accept Schellenberg's claim that the existence of God is incompatible with the existence of non-resistant non-belief. They can, for example, say that all non-resistant people do believe that God exists and/or that all non-belief is due to sinful resistance to God and God's morally righteous will. But Schellenberg's claim is denied by many actual theists. Since this article aims to present an argument for atheism that contains a premise about what God would do, if God existed, that is acceptable to as many theists as possible, let us consider the following modified version of Schellenberg's view instead. If God existed, then God would seek to express benevolence towards people within the context of the aforementioned kind of personal relationship. But God's perfect love does not require God to arrange things so that every person will believe that God exists at the moment when they become sufficiently open to, and desiring of, such a relationship. If God existed, then God could permit a person to non-resistantly be in a state of non-belief so long as they are not in this state for too long. There is room for debate about how long is 'too long', but a later section in this article will give reasons to think that if God existed, then God would not permit a person who is sufficiently open to God to be in a state of non-belief, or to be without conclusive evidence for the reality of God, for several years.

The third set of expectations regarding God concerns experiencing moral transformation or progress over time. Moser (2010) argues for the view that if God existed, then

God would seek what is morally best for us, and what is best for us would include our cooperation with God in being morally transformed over time. This process of 'volitional' transformation, if experienced, would include becoming less selfish and more loving towards (and forgiving of) others. It would include gradually becoming the kind of person who reflects the moral character of God as revealed in Jesus and who is filled with the 'fruit of God's Spirit', that is, with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And it would include receiving at some time(s) an authoritative call or invitation from God via one's conscience to enter into a right relationship with God and to cooperate with God in having one's destructive and selfish tendencies replaced by a motivational core characterized by unselfish love and forgivingness over time. This cooperation would not be easy, but would require ongoing human 'struggle' *against* sinful self-sufficiency and *for* God and God's morally perfect purposes. Moser's view implies that if God existed, then anyone who satisfied certain conditions – such as having an attitude of due humility, having a strong and persistent desire to become less selfish and more loving (and forgiving), and persevering in prayer for God's will, rather than one's own will, to be done – would experience religious and moral transformation over time.

Moser argues for the view that human inquiry about the reality of God is a morally significant activity in the sense that anyone who seeks evidence for the existence of God has moral duties to go about this project in certain ways. If God existed, and if a person approached the question of whether God exists with an attitude of selfish pride or with demands for the kind of evidence that does not include some kind of moral challenge to those who receive it, then not only will they obstruct potential evidence for the reality of God, they will also be guilty of moral wrongdoing and idolatry. If God existed, then God might have excellent and benevolent reasons for withholding evidence from inquirers who have such attitudes and make such demands, and who fail to give God the respect and honour that is owed to a morally perfect and righteous god. This introduces into the discussion the important idea of having morally permissible expectations regarding what God would (and would not) do, if God existed.

This article uses the terms 'religious experience' and 'religious transformation' to refer to experiences and changes in one's will or character that cannot be adequately described without mentioning the concept of 'God'. Religious experiences include things such as being aware of the apparent loving and consoling personal presence of God in times of severe suffering, being aware of apparent attempts on the part of God to develop the kind of positive personal relationship with one that is (at least in some important ways) similar to the healthy and loving relationships between parents and children with which we are familiar, appearing to grow 'closer' to God over time, and being aware of an apparent divine call from God to be and to act in certain ways. This article uses the term 'moral transformation' to refer to positive moral changes in one's will or character, that is, changes towards which we would have pro-attitudes, such as desire or approval, if we were rational, reasonable, and well-informed. Positive moral transformation or growth includes things like developing moral virtue, becoming less selfish (but not necessarily less concerned with one's own important interests), and becoming more benevolent towards, and respectful of, others. The next section will describe some ways in which a person can have good evidence for atheism, namely, by not having the kinds of religious and morally transforming experiences described by Stump, Schellenberg, and Moser, despite having and doing the right kinds of attitudes and actions.

A first-person argument for atheism

The claims about what God would do, if God existed, mentioned above have some interesting features. They are acceptable to theists, or at least to those who believe in the kind of deity on which this article is choosing to focus. Indeed, both Stump and Moser are theists, and although they do not attempt to prove that God exists or assume that any particular religious text is 'true' or authoritative, they consider their views to be affirmed in, or at least in harmony with, Christianity and the biblical tradition(s). (Stump's defence against arguments from evil includes lengthy reflections on the biblical stories of Job, Samson, Abraham, and Mary of Bethany, and Moser's proposed reorientation of religious epistemology relies heavily on the New Testament. Indeed, Schellenberg calls Moser's work in religious epistemology 'part theology'.) The particular ways in which they argue for their views may be new, but the main conclusions themselves are not new. Contrast this with claims about what God would do, if God existed, that are defended by philosophers in their attempts to prove that atheism is true. Claims such as, 'If God existed, then horrendous evils would not exist', 'If God existed, then the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 would not have occurred', and, 'If God existed, then non-belief in relation to the proposition that God exists would not exist', for example, are not acceptable to theists and are incompatible with what is affirmed in many major monotheistic religious traditions.

The claims in the previous section also have not received as much attention among philosophers, at least until recently. When these expectations regarding God are the subject of discussion, it is usually within the context of asking whether the existence of things like evil and divine hiddenness are, for anyone who is aware of them, strong evidence for atheism. This article, however, will explore how these claims and expectations can be used by some people who satisfy certain conditions to construct a good or rationally persuasive argument for atheism. The basic idea is that any person who

- (i) has justified beliefs that some of the claims about what God would do, if God existed, that are defended by philosophers such as Stump, Schellenberg, and Moser, and that are affirmed in some major monotheistic religious traditions, are true,
- (ii) has justified beliefs that they have had the attitudes and desires, and have been doing the actions, that would, if God existed, result in their having the relevant kinds of religious and morally transforming experiences, for several years,
- (iii) has justified beliefs that they have not had any religious or morally transforming experiences, and
- (iv) is not obstructing relevant evidence by inquiring about the reality of God in morally wrong/vicious or sinful ways,

has good evidence for atheism. They are, moreover, in a position to know that they have good evidence for atheism.

Consider the following statements. 'I have cried out to God, in humility and with great fervour, in times of severe suffering, heartbrokenness, and overwhelming despair, but I have not felt or been aware of the loving and consoling personal presence of God.' 'I have been open to, and have had a strong and persistent desire for, a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship with God for several years, but I have not been aware of shared attention with God or even of attempts on the part of God to interact with me in ways that might help get us started in a personal relationship.' 'For several years, I have persevered in praying for divine help to become less selfish, to become more loving towards (and forgiving of) others, and to "bear" in my heart the "fruit of God's Spirit", but I have not made any significant moral progress.' If a person has justified beliefs that these

or similar statements are true [for them], and has justified beliefs that these statements would not be true, if God existed, then they have good evidence for atheism.

The evidence would, if a person had it, be ‘private’ evidence or first-hand experiential evidence. A person can have evidence for the truth of a particular proposition *P*, or good epistemic reasons to believe that *P*, even if some other people lack evidence for the truth of *P*, and even if they cannot share their evidence with others in a way that would result in others having similar evidence for the truth of *P*. (On the perspectival nature or person-relativity of evidence and epistemic reasons in connection with beliefs about God, see Mavrodes (1970).) This might occur, for example, when a person has experiences which others have not had. If a particular proposition that a person understands explains why they have had certain experiences in certain ways and at certain times better than every other contrary proposition that they understand, for example, then they arguably have good evidence for the truth of that proposition. (For a defence of this view, see Moser (1989).) It follows that a person can have justified beliefs about their own attitudes (e.g. humility), desires (e.g. a strong desire for the presence of God), actions (e.g. persevering in prayer), and experiences (e.g. not having had any religious or morally transforming experiences) and not be able to give the evidence on which their beliefs are based (e.g. memories and introspection) to others.

Although a person can have evidence for the truth of a particular proposition without having an argument for the truth of that proposition, the person who satisfies conditions (i)–(iv) can construct an argument for atheism, if they want to do so. Let us say that a person ‘seeks God’ if they seek things like the loving and consoling personal presence of God in times of severe suffering and heartbrokenness, a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship with God, and divine help to become the kind of person who reflects the moral character of God, in the right ways (e.g. praying with due humility, meditating on certain sacred texts and stories) and for several years. And let us say that a person ‘encounters God’ if they are at some time(s) aware of the apparent personal presence of God, the kind of apparent interaction with God that is essential to any positive personal relationship with God (e.g. apparently receiving an offer of divine forgiveness), and/or apparently receiving divine help to make progress in their moral character and motivations. Here, then, is a sample version of a first-person argument for atheism:

- (P1) If a person is the object of perfect/unsurpassable love, then if they have been seeking God in the right ways and for several years, then they would have at some time(s) encountered God.
- (P2) I have been seeking God in the right ways and for several years, but I have not encountered God. For example, I have felt completely alone and without consolation in times of suffering from heartbrokenness and deep shame, I have never felt shared attention with God or been aware of personal interactions with God, and I am still unable to love and forgive some other people.
- So, (C1) I am not the object of perfect/unsurpassable love. (from [P1] and [P2])
- (P3) Necessarily, if God exists, then God has perfect/unsurpassable love for everyone.
- So, (C2) It is not the case that God exists. (from [C1] and [P3])

Note that this argument contains three premises, namely, a claim about what God would do, if God existed, a claim that is stated from the first-person perspective, and a statement that is analytically true or true by definition.

We have focused, thus far, on specific claims about what God would do, if God existed, in part because philosophers such as Stump, Schellenberg, and Moser have offered powerful arguments for them. There are some additional expectations regarding how God would

act in the world, if God existed, that are acceptable to many theists and are affirmed in some major monotheistic religious traditions, but might not have yet received a rigorous philosophical defence in the academic literature. A person who forms justified beliefs that these expectations are true or correct, and has justified beliefs about their not having had the relevant religious and morally transforming experiences despite the fact that they satisfy the relevant conditions, will have good evidence for atheism. These beliefs are worth mentioning and include the following. 'I have been regularly participating in certain acts of worship, such as prayer, fasting, charitable giving, a religious pilgrimage, sacramental meals, and singing (e.g. psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, some of which include sentences stated from the second-person perspective and are addressed to God), and have done so for many years, with humility and openness to God and God's will, but I have not been aware of shared attention with God or experienced positive changes in my moral character.' 'I have been carefully studying and meditating on sacred texts, with other members of a community of faith and in consultation with scholarship on these texts, and with openness to God and God's will, but I have not been aware of a personal encounter with God, and I do not find myself with the belief that the god described in the texts is worthy of worship or perfectly loving; indeed, I find myself with the belief that the god described in the texts is, or at some times acted like, a moral monster.' 'I have been praying for divine help to respond to my own severe suffering in morally right and virtuous ways, and have done so for many years, with humility and earnestness, but I have seriously failed to be good and to do what is right; for example, I still am filled with hatred and malice towards some other people.' 'I have been praying for the forgiveness of my sins and for the joy that comes from knowing that I have been forgiven by God, and have done so for many years with humility, contrition, and persistence, but I still am overwhelmed by guilt, shame, and loneliness.' 'I have been praying the "Gethsemane prayer" – that is, a prayer for God's will, and not my own will, to be done in my life – with humility and earnestness, almost every day and for several years, but I have not sensed the presence of God, experienced moral transformation, or received divine practical guidance; the actions that I have done in the absence of such guidance, moreover, have had very bad consequences.'

What makes the first-person argument for atheism in this article unique

The argument for atheism in the previous section differs from familiar arguments from evil, from Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness, from what Yujin Nagasawa calls problems of 'divine absence', and from versions of the argument that do not include a premise stated from the first-person perspective. It differs from familiar arguments from evil in the following ways. (For an overview of some of these arguments, see Tooley (2015).) First, familiar arguments from evil do not contain a premise that is stated from the first-person perspective. When they do mention a particular individual or group, it is to draw our attention to the particular ways in which that individual or group has suffered, or to draw our attention to what 'we' the readers do not know or cannot see or imagine. The arguments are still intended to persuade anyone who considers them, regardless of what kinds of attitudes and desires they have, actions they have done, and experiences they have had.

Second, familiar arguments from evil typically contain premises that are clearly unacceptable to most theists and are incompatible with what is affirmed in most major monotheistic religious traditions. It should be obvious to anyone who has studied religions, for example, that adherents of some of these traditions cannot accept the claim that if God existed, then evil would not exist, or the claim that there exist instances of intense suffering that are pointless. These premises might be subconclusions in a larger argument for atheism, but the goal for a religious believer who aims to refute the

argument will be clear, namely, to identify and then present objections to the reasons offered in support of these subconclusions. For example, the goal might be to refute the view that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, or to cast doubt on the view that if a particular instance of intense suffering served some outweighing good, then we would probably 'see' or cognize this good. In contrast, besides the premise stated from the first-person perspective, the premises in the argument for atheism in this article are acceptable to many theists. Indeed, these premises are affirmed in some major monotheistic religious traditions, sometimes as the contents of divine promises, and are the conclusions for which some of these theists have argued. Hence, these premises cannot be denied by adherents of these traditions or by these philosophers.

Third, it is unclear whether any of the critical responses to familiar arguments from evil will be effective against the first-person argument for atheism in this article. Some of these responses, for example, mention possible goods that could not, or would not, exist unless certain evils existed or occurred. If we could tell a coherent and epistemically possible story according to which these goods were great enough and were related to the evils in the right sort of way, then this story might give us a good reason to doubt that no reason could possibly justify God's permitting those evils. The goods that are mentioned, however, are often the very religious and morally transforming experiences that we have been discussing in this article – for example, spiritual and moral development, increasing personal intimacy with God, and the cultivation of habits and character traits that make one intrinsically better and that make possible better relationships with God and others. It may be difficult for us to see why God, if God existed, would allow a person to suffer. But it is even more difficult for us to see why God, if God existed, would not respond positively to a person's persistent and humble pleas for God's loving and consoling personal presence in times of severe suffering, for God to empower them to respond to their own suffering in morally appropriate ways, or for God's help to obey God's commands to love and forgive others.

Although influenced by Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness, the argument for atheism in this article differs from it in several ways. First, Schellenberg's argument focuses on the existence of non-resistant non-belief – for example, on the existence of atheists and agnostics who are sufficiently open to a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship with God. It is intended to issue a particular challenge to anyone who considers and understands it, namely, a challenge to either justifiably deny one of its premises or accept atheism. The argument in this article, in contrast, contains a premise stated from the first-person perspective, and hence, only issues a challenge to those who satisfy certain conditions and have not had certain experiences. It is not intended to persuade just any person who reflects on it to believe that God does not exist. Second, this article's argument for atheism does not depend on the disputed view that if God existed, then non-resistant non-belief would not exist. It leaves room for the possibility of God permitting a person to non-resistantly be in a state of non-belief so long as this state is temporary and does not last for too long (e.g. for several years).

The argument for atheism in this article also differs from what Nagasawa (2015) calls problems of 'divine absence'. 'Divine absence', for Nagasawa, occurs when a devout believer suffers from horrendous evil and is perplexed, intellectually and emotionally, as to why God remains silent despite their severe pain and suffering. He distinguishes between the intellectual problem of divine absence and the experiential problem of divine absence. The former can be formulated from the third-person perspective and concerns the logical consistency between the existence of God and the occurrence of divine absence, or the evidential bearing between the propositions that God exists and that divine absence occurs. The latter problem, on the other hand, is a problem specifically for devout believers. Its formulation contains first-person statements about one's own

experiences and second-person questions and pleas addressed to God. It occurs, for example, when a devout believer who suffers from horrendous evil says, 'God, why are you silent? If you exist, you should not be [silent]. Help us or at least explain to us why you cannot help us! Present your existence to us!' Nagasawa focuses on the experiential problem, and proposes, not a solution to it, but a practical way for devout believers to respond to it. The response rests on the idea that if we did not encounter evil, suffering, and the temptation to remain hopeless, then we would not need 'true' religious faith in the first place. Devout believers can and should respond to these difficulties by choosing to adopt what Nagasawa calls 'cosmic optimism', that is, an attitude of hope that the puzzlement raised by divine absence corresponds to their cognitive limitations, and a decision to see their encounters with divine absence as opportunities to embrace epistemic humility and as the starting point for 'true' religion.

Nagasawa distinguishes between the intellectual problem of divine absence, which can be formulated from the third-person perspective and hence is a challenge for anyone who considers it, and the experiential problem of divine absence, which is a problem specifically for devout believers. The argument for atheism in this article, in contrast, is an 'intellectual' problem, not specifically for devout believers, but for anyone who has certain justified beliefs about what God would do, if God existed, and about their not having had certain kinds of religious and morally transforming experiences despite the fact that they satisfy certain conditions. Nagasawa does not attempt to solve the intellectual problem of divine absence, and the practical proposal he offers to devout believers does not offer any help to those who face the 'intellectual' problem discussed in this article. His article assumes, without argument, that devout believers are justified or warranted in believing that God exists, but this is not an assumption that we can legitimately make in the context of this article. Hence, it would be irrelevant or question-begging to say that people who have justified beliefs that the premises in the argument for atheism in this article are true should choose to have 'cosmic optimism'.

A final feature of the argument for atheism in this article that makes it unique among other familiar arguments for atheism is its inclusion of a premise that is stated from the first-person singular perspective.¹ This feature is valuable for several reasons. First, it makes the fact that the argument is intended to rationally persuade only some people who satisfy specific conditions, but not all people, obvious. It does not advertise itself as available to just anyone at all regardless of their attitudes, desires, past actions, or experiences. Second, it invites people to who might want to use the argument to help discern whether God exists to carefully examine their own attitudes, desires, past actions, and experiences, and to see whether they satisfy the relevant conditions and have the relevant justified beliefs. It makes it relatively easy for those who do satisfy the relevant conditions, moreover, to straightforwardly apply the argument to their own case.

Third, although we could construct a version of the argument that lacked this feature and contained only premises stated from the third-person perspective, this modified argument would 'work' or be useful for the purposes of discerning whether God exists only if the first-person version of the argument 'worked' or were rationally persuasive for at least one person. For this reason, and for our purposes in this article, it is worth focusing on the question of whether the first-person argument for atheism outlined above is 'good' or can be rationally persuasive for a person. Suppose we replaced (P2) and (C1) in the argument with the following:

(P2*) At least one person has been seeking God (that is, seeking things like the loving and consoling personal presence of God in times of severe suffering, a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship with God, and divine help to become the kind of person who reflects the moral character of God,

in the right ways and for several years) but has not encountered God (that is, has not been aware of the apparent personal presence of God, has not experienced the kind of apparent interaction with God that is essential to any positive personal relationship with God, and has not apparently received divine help to make progress in their moral character and motivations).

So, (C1*) At least one person is not the object of perfect/unsurpassable love.

This third-person argument would be rationally persuasive for a person who satisfied conditions (i)–(iv) and derived the truth of (P2*) from their justified belief that (P2) is true [for them] via existential generalization. But this derivation would be unnecessary if they were to consider the first-person version of the argument instead. One reason to prefer this third-person version of the argument is to have an argument that could be rationally persuasive to someone who failed to satisfy conditions (i)–(iv) but was aware of some *other* person who satisfied these conditions and for whom the first-person version of the argument is rationally persuasive. Someone who had this awareness would have evidence for the truth of (P2*).

It may be difficult, however, to form a justified belief that some other person satisfies conditions (i)–(iv). What Howard-Snyder and Green say as regards knowing whether there are non-resistant non-believers also applies to knowing whether there are people who satisfy conditions (i)–(iv), that is, to knowing whether there are genuine seekers of God who have failed to encounter God. They write,

[Even] if there are some nonresistant nonbelievers, it may well be quite difficult to discern whether they possess or fail to possess those motivations, attitudes, and dispositions that allegedly explain their nonbelief in a theistically friendly fashion. If the difficulty is severe enough, then it might be that no one – whether theists, atheists, agnostics, or what-have-you – is well-positioned to say that there are some nonresistant nonbelievers. (sec. 3 in Howard-Snyder & Green (2016))

Even if a person who lacks a belief that (P2) is true [for them] could form a justified belief that (P2*) is true on the basis of their awareness of some other person who apparently satisfies conditions (i)–(iv), their epistemic position would, in some ways, be inferior to the position of a person who has a justified belief that (P2) is true [for them], that is, to the position of a person who can say of themselves, ‘I have been seeking God in the right ways and for several years, but I have not encountered God.’ When a person has justified beliefs about their own attitudes, desires, actions, and experiences, their beliefs will be based upon evidence that comes from sources such as introspection, memory, and perhaps the testimony of other people. For example, a person can carefully examine themselves and see that they have strong desires to begin a personal relationship with God and to receive comfort from God in times of intense suffering, remember praying regularly for divine help to develop that kind of motivational core that reflects the character of God (e.g. as revealed in the New Testament portraits of Jesus) for several years, and have other people who know them well confirm that they have failed to make moral progress. In contrast, we cannot form justified beliefs about other people’s attitudes, desires, actions, and experiences via introspection. We must rely on sources of evidence such as sense perception and testimony. We should be in a position to know that we are praying, and to know the contents of our prayers, every time we pray. But the occasions on which we can observe another particular person praying will be relatively rare, and unless they do things like pray out loud or share the details of their ‘prayer life’ with us, the contents of their prayers, the attitudes that they have when they pray, and how often they pray, will remain hidden from us.

Suppose that a person fails to satisfy conditions (i)–(iv), perhaps because they lack humility or a strong desire to make moral progress, or perhaps because they do have apparent interactions with God, but forms a justified belief that some other genuine seeker of God has failed to encounter God. This belief could be defeated relatively easily – for example, by the seeker’s testifying about a recent religious experience or by other people testifying about recent positive changes in that seeker’s moral character. When a person has a justified belief about their own failure to encounter God despite the fact that they have been seeking God, on the other hand, this belief cannot be defeated as easily by similar kinds of testimony. It will be more resistant to being defeated, for example, by the testimony of others who say that the person, contrary to what they believe, lacks a strong desire to sense the presence of God, has had religious experiences, or does exhibit the ‘fruit of God’s Spirit’. The evidence that one has about one’s own attitudes, desires, actions, and experiences will, in most relevant cases, be stronger and more resilient than the evidence that one has about other people’s attitudes, desires, actions, and experiences. These facts about evidence and defeat suggest that a person who satisfies conditions (i)–(iv) will have stronger evidence for atheism than someone who fails to satisfy these conditions but is aware of some other person who apparently satisfies these conditions.

Some critical responses to the argument

Let us consider some critical responses to the first-person argument for atheism in this article. One response is to refuse to make the semantic decision to use the term ‘God’ in a way that includes as part of its meaning ‘being perfectly or unsurpassably loving’. However, this amounts to changing the subject of discussion and/or refusing to assess the argument. Instead of debating how to use the term ‘God’, we could simply coin a new term, such as ‘Schmod’, for example, and use it to mean ‘a person, or something very much like a person, who is worthy of worship, morally perfect, and unsurpassably loving’. We could ask what Schmod would (and would not) do, if Schmod existed, and what kind of evidence for (or against) the reality of Schmod it would be reasonable and morally permissible for us to expect there to be, if Schmod existed. And then we could explore what some plausible answers to these questions might imply about acquiring private evidence for the non-existence of Schmod.² The answers to these questions would be relevant, moreover, to our study and evaluation of some major monotheistic religious traditions. For this reason, it would be a mistake to say that the argument is not of much value because it ‘only’ disproves the existence of a particular kind of god, namely, a god who desires to express benevolence to receptive individuals within the context of a positive personal relationship with them.

A second response is to deny that the views about what God would do, if God existed, on which this article focuses and that are defended by philosophers such as Stump, Schellenberg, and Moser, are true. This response faces challenges, however. These philosophers give arguments for their views. This article does not rehearse the arguments or attempt to give additional support for them, but they do deserve careful consideration from anyone who wants to justifiably deny their conclusions. These views, moreover, are affirmed in some major monotheistic religious traditions. Indeed, that God will perform benevolent actions, such as giving comfort, peace, and empowerment to do what is morally right, to those who ‘seek God’ in the right ways is, in some traditions, *promised* by God. (In some traditions, God is the one who goes after and ‘searches’ for human beings, and human beings are the ones who are ‘found’.) Hence, the views about what God would do, if God existed, on which the argument for atheism in this article depends cannot be denied by adherents of these religious traditions or ignored by those who are interested in the question of whether these traditions are ‘correct’ or worthy of joining.

A third response is to say that no actual person satisfies conditions (i)–(iv) above, that is, that no one who genuinely seeks, with humility, patience, and earnestness, things like the consoling personal presence of God in times of severe suffering, the kind of meaningful interaction with God that is essential to any positive personal relationship with God, or divine empowerment to become a morally better person and to do what is morally right, for several years fails to obtain these things. To use biblical language, ‘Everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.’ But how might one argue for this view? That no one satisfies conditions (i)–(iv) is not an analytically true statement, and hence, is not a statement or proposition that can be known *a priori*. It would not help, moreover, to conduct an empirical investigation. An empirical investigation might, at most, be able to show that there are strong correlations between ‘seeking God’ and ‘encountering God’, but such an investigation cannot show that *no one* who seeks God in the right ways fails to encounter God.

A person can know that no actual person satisfies conditions (i)–(iv), or that all genuine seekers of God will eventually encounter God, only if they already know that God exists. This belief will (arguably) be derivable from the conjunction of their belief that God exists and other relevant beliefs, such as beliefs about love, personal relationships, and human well-being, or its truth will be revealed to them by God. The problem, however, is that anyone who satisfies conditions (i)–(iv) should be in a position to know that at least one person satisfies these conditions (namely, themselves), and hence, cannot without inconsistency believe that no actual person satisfies these conditions. The argument for atheism in this article is intended to rationally persuade only those who satisfy conditions (i)–(iv), not those who have a justified belief that God exists and fail to satisfy all these conditions.

A fourth response is to express doubt about whether any person can have a strong and persistent desire to make moral progress and not achieve success. Anyone who has such a desire and strives to grow in the direction of moral perfection will, by definition, take action. One will do things like practice meditation, seek guidance from a morally admirable and trustworthy mentor, repeatedly do actions in circumstances that morally virtuous people would do, if they were in similar circumstances, in the hope of gradually changing one’s motivations and dispositions, and seek help from professional therapists or counsellors. And anyone who takes these or similar kinds of steps will change morally for the better. In reply, it is important to note that the moral standard by which a person and their actions can be correctly judged will depend in part on the existence, nature, and activity of God, or on what kinds of goals (and commands) God would have (and give), if God existed. We might be morally obligated, for example, to love our enemies, to pray for (or wish good for) those who persecute us, to forgive those who trespass against us, to cultivate in ourselves the ‘fruit of God’s Spirit’, and to devote a significant portion of our resources to ‘the least’ in society, that is, to the poor, the stranger, the sick, and the incarcerated, only if God exists, treats us in certain ways, and issues certain commands. We must, therefore, remember to take into account the moral standard that would exist or be correct, if God existed, when attempting to determine whether a person fails to experience moral transformation, and hence, counts as having failed to ‘encounter God’.

Given the aforementioned lesson about how what counts as moral progress depends in part upon what God would demand of human beings, if God existed, and given the fact that not everyone has access to morally excellent mentors or professional therapists, we should refrain from being overly optimistic about whether all who commit to making moral progress will be successful. There might be people who have strong second-order volitions to have and to be moved by the desire to love their neighbours, especially when those neighbours are of a different race or ethnicity, the desire to forgive others who have done terrible evil to them, the desire to be filled with things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, and the

desire to give a substantial portion of their time and money to the poor and oppressed, but who nevertheless fail to do these actions. There might, in other words, be people who can truly say, 'For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.' Or at least, we do not have good reason to think that there are no such people.

A fifth response is to say that a person can be mistaken about their own attitudes, desires, and actions. Perhaps they are not as receptive or open to God and God's morally righteous will as they think they are, have not been asking from or seeking God in the right ways, and have been, at a less than fully conscious level, rejecting God's attempts to offer moral guidance to them and to empower unselfish love (and forgivingness) in them. (Think, for example, of a rich young man who believes that what he wants most is to live the kind of life that God demands of him, but upon receiving the divine command to sell his possessions and to distribute the money to the poor, becomes sad and 'walks away' from God.) This possibility deserves serious consideration, but if the person lacks a good reason to think that it is actual, and has carefully examined their own attitudes and desires, perhaps with the help of other experts who know them well, then the mere possibility of being mistaken does not constitute a refutation of the argument.

A sixth response is to say that a person can be mistaken about their own experiences. Perhaps they have had religious and morally transforming experiences, such as having benefitted from the personal presence of God in times of severe suffering, and having become more loving towards, and forgiving of, others over time, contrary to what they believe. Think, for example, of someone who is mistaken about the source of the comfort that they have received. They receive consolation via the personal presence of God, but fail to recognize it as such. They take the source of this consolation to be 'the Universe' or a non-personal 'Goodness Itself'. It may even be the case that if God had not provided them with God's loving and consoling presence, then they would have been much worse off spiritually and emotionally. Again, these possibilities deserve serious consideration, but if the person lacks evidence for the view that these situations are actual, and if they have carefully examined their own experiences and memories, perhaps with the help of experts who know them well, then the mere possibility of being mistaken does not constitute a refutation of the argument for atheism in this article.

A seventh response is to say that a person can have unreasonable and immoral expectations regarding *when* they should be having the relevant religious and morally transforming experiences. They can be mistaken, for example, about whether they have been waiting to have the experiences for 'too long'. If God existed, then God's perfect love would not require God to meet our hasty schedules. (For more on this view, see Moser's contribution in Schellenberg & Moser [2004].) In reply, let us consider the claims about what God would do, if God existed, defended by Schellenberg, Moser, and Stump, separately.

Schellenberg argues for the view that the existence of God is incompatible with the existence of non-resistant non-belief. This view implies that if God exists, then any person will believe that God exists at the moment when they are sufficiently open to a particular kind of personal relationship with God, namely, a relationship that is positively meaningful, allows for deep sharing, is valued for its own sake, and is such that both parties recognize themselves to be in it. This article chose to consider a more modest version of this view according to which God, if God existed, would seek to develop such a relationship with people, but could have morally sufficient reasons for permitting temporary non-resistant non-belief, and hence, could wait to reveal Godself to non-resistant believers until a later time – provided that God does not delay in revealing Godself for too long. This article suggests that in most cases, it would be reasonable to think that a person has been waiting for 'too long' if they have had a strong and persistent desire to begin

the aforementioned kind of relationship with God for several years, and yet still lack good evidence for the view that they are, or ever were, in such a relationship.

Love of another person, according to the account that is defended by Stump and that is similar to the one presupposed by Schellenberg, requires desiring what is truly good for that person and desiring an appropriate kind of interpersonal union with, and closeness to, that person. The best kind of union with, and closeness to, God, if God existed, would occur within the context of a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship with God. (A relationship between two people in which one person fails to believe that the other exists, if such a relationship were even possible, would, all things being equal, be inferior to a relationship in which each person knows that the other exists.) It is difficult to see why God, if God existed, might wait several years to reveal Godself to a person who strongly desires and persistently requests to enter into the kind of relationship in which they can enjoy union with, and closeness to, God, especially given the fact that such union and closeness would, if a person enjoyed it, involve trust in God and obedience to God and God's morally righteous will. The difficulty is exacerbated in cases where the person finds themselves in a context where many other people testify about enjoying such a relationship with God. There are certain kinds of communal goods and valuable group activities that require on the part of participants having a justified belief that they have a loving personal relationship with God. Think, for example, of praying with and for others, participating in corporate acts of worship, participating in religious celebrations and other occasions that centre talk about and attitudes towards God, giving and receiving the kind of comfort and encouragement that includes God-centred content, and doing good for others as 'one body' or community of faith. A person who lacks evidence for the view that they have a personal relationship with God will be unable to participate in these kinds of life-improving and meaning-giving activities; or at least, their participation will be defective and far from ideal. It is reasonable, therefore, to expect God, if God exists and lovingly desires what is best for everyone, to arrange things so that no person who has been sufficiently open to, and desiring of, a proper relationship with God for several years will fail to enjoy such a relationship. (That this expectation is correct, it should be noted, cannot be disproved or disconfirmed by the existence of 'deathbed conversions' to theism. These conversions do not refute the reasons just given to think that God, if God existed, would not delay in revealing Godself to those who have been seeking God for several years.)

Moser argues for the view that if God existed, then God would seek, among other things, the spiritual and moral development of human beings. This development would include, for anyone who is sufficiently receptive to God, having one's destructive and selfish motives gradually replaced by a motivational core characterized by love and forgiveness over time. It is difficult to see why God, if God existed, would delay in empowering such transformation in willing individuals, especially given the fact that positive moral transformation is good not just for the person who experiences it, but also for the people around them (and arguably, for the society of which they are a member). If Stump is right about how union with, and closeness to, God and others is limited by the extent to which one's desires are integrated around what is truly good or morally excellent, moreover, then awareness of this fact gives us another reason to expect God, if God exists, to not delay in empowering moral transformation in willing individuals. Perhaps in some cases, God can 'give people up' to their own sinfulness, at least temporarily, for the sake of greater religious and moral transformation later on. Even if this were possible, however, awareness of this possibility would not help those who satisfy conditions (i)–(iv) above. The mere possibility that God exists and is choosing, for the sake of greater spiritual and moral development at some future time, to ignore a person's strong and persistent desire for divine help to make moral progress now is not a refutation of the argument for atheism in this article.³

This article interprets Stump to be describing what God would do, if God existed. On this interpretation, if God existed, then God would make things like God's loving and consoling personal presence, shared attention with God, and closeness to God available to sufferers who are willing, and who request, to receive them. A person who wants and requests these things wants and needs them while they suffer, and not just after they suffer. Indeed, the idea of receiving solace and comfort when one is not suffering may be incoherent. It is important to note that the relevant seeker is not requesting freedom from pain and suffering, or deliverance from the 'trials and tribulations' of human life, but the loving presence of God while they suffer and divine help to respond to their own suffering in morally appropriate ways. It is also important to remember that consolation does not take away suffering. A person who grieves over the death of a loved one, for example, can receive comfort from a friend who is present to them and who weeps with them, but the suffering remains. It is reasonable, therefore, for anyone who seeks, with humility and earnestness, the loving and consoling personal presence of God to expect God, if God exists, not to delay in providing them with it when they suffer in terrible and heart-breaking ways. (The correctness or reasonableness of this expectation, however, does not entail the view that any sufferer who seeks comfort from God, but has not yet received it, will not receive it at some future time.)

An eighth response to the argument for atheism in this article is to say that even if a person who satisfies conditions (i)–(iv) and/or has justified beliefs that the premises in the argument outlined above are true has some evidence for atheism, this evidence might be outweighed by the evidence that they currently have for the reality of God. This evidence might come from their own religious experiences, the arguments of natural theology, and/or religious testimony. In reply, the people to whom the argument is being offered have not had religious experiences, and hence do not have evidence for the existence of God based on such experiences. Most familiar arguments of natural theology, moreover, are not arguments for the reality of the kind of deity on which this article is choosing to focus. They might confirm the existence of a 'first cause' or an intelligent designer, for example, but they fail to offer a good reason to think that some actual person is worthy of worship, morally perfect, and has unsurpassable love for everyone. Potential exceptions include ontological arguments and moral arguments. It is unclear, however, whether anyone can come to have good non-question-begging evidence for the reality of God via careful reflection on any of these arguments; or at least, exploring this question is beyond the scope of this article. Furthermore, it is unclear whether a person can, in a context where there appears to be much reasonable religious disagreement, come to have strong evidence for the existence of God solely on the basis of the religious testimony of other people. Even if one could form a justified belief that some other people enjoy some kind of relationship with, or connection to, a superhuman being who loves them, this belief, by itself, would not entail or offer strong evidential support for the view that one is the object of perfect divine love. Remember that given the way in which we are using the term 'God' in this article, a person has evidence for the reality of God only if they have evidence for the existence of some person who has perfect (or unsurpassable) love for everyone, including them.

A ninth response is to say that the epistemic position of a person who satisfies conditions (i)–(iv) and who forms the belief that atheism is true on the basis of an argument that includes statements (P1)–(P3) above lacks a certain kind valuable resilience and stability. The evidence that they currently possess might point in the direction of atheism, but their overall 'available' evidence, including currently undisclosed evidence, or evidence that they could come to possess without undue difficulty, might point in the direction of theism instead. Moser (2012) argues for the view that those who recommend that we believe that God does not exist on the basis of our overall available evidence

face a problem from what he calls ‘potential surprise evidence’. Given that we are in a context where many otherwise reasonable people report their having experiential evidence for the claim that God exists, those who make this recommendation are not in a position to tell whether our available evidence, including our currently undisclosed evidence, contains undefeated evidence for the reality of God. They have no basis, for example, to rule out the possibility that God exists and will, at some future time, intervene in our experience in a way that results in our having undefeated evidence for the claim that God exists. If we value and seek positions of epistemic resilience, that is, positions that are able to withstand our broader available evidence, beyond the disclosed evidence that we currently possess, then those of us who currently lack conclusive evidence for the reality of God should accept agnosticism (that is, should neither affirm nor deny that God exists) rather than accept atheism.

In reply, the problem from potential surprise evidence discussed by Moser is a problem only for certain people, namely, for those who aim at justifying their recommendation that ‘we’ believe that God does not exist on the basis of ‘our’ overall available evidence. The intended recipients of this recommendation appear to be everyone who lacks conclusive evidence for the reality of God. The first-person argument for atheism in this article, in contrast, is not intended to justify to others a particular recommendation or to justify a case for atheism. (It is not, in other words, intended to support what Moser calls ‘evidential atheism’.) It is intended to rationally persuade only those who satisfy conditions (i)–(iv) above that God does not exist. (It is intended, in other words, to prove to some people that what Moser calls ‘simple atheism’ is true. But it is not intended to prove that some actual person satisfies conditions [i]–[iv].) Moser assumes, moreover, that those who recommend atheism to others on the basis of our overall available evidence, and hence, who face the problem from potential surprise evidence, lack strong evidence, or a good argument, for atheism. This article, however, describes ways in which a person can have good private evidence for atheism – ways that have not received as much attention among philosophers and that he, in particular, has not yet addressed. If a person has such evidence, then they do not face the problem from potential surprise evidence.⁴

A final response to the argument for atheism in this article is to say that things like divine hiddenness, divine absence, and divine silence have been mentioned and reflected upon in many major monotheistic religious traditions, including in their sacred texts, and hence, it is reasonable for anyone who is familiar with these traditions to expect that these things would exist or occur, if God existed. If it is reasonable to have this expectation, then the existence or occurrence of divine hiddenness/absence/silence cannot be evidence for atheism. The psalmists in Jewish religious traditions, for example, often complain about God forsaking them, not answering their cries, standing far off, and hiding God’s face in times of trouble. (See, for example, the texts cited in the introduction to Howard-Snyder & Moser (2002).) In reply, when these felt experiences of divine hiddenness/absence/silence occur, it is within the context of a continuing conscious relationship with God. The god to whom the psalmists complain, for example, is also praised by them for delivering them or their ancestors, hearing the desires of the meek, strengthening the hearts of the meek, doing justice for the orphan and the oppressed, and turning mourning into joy. These felt experiences of divine hiddenness occur within the context of a life in which the person has had religious and morally transforming experiences at other times – experiences that constitute evidence for the reality of God. The person who satisfies conditions (i)–(iv) above, however, has a justified belief that they have not had any relevant religious or morally transforming experiences. There is a difference between not feeling the presence of God and not ‘hearing’ from God after having already encountered God and/or shortly before encountering God, on the one hand, and having never sensed

the presence or 'voice' of God despite having been seeking God in the right ways and for several years, on the other hand. Hence, even if it were reasonable to expect there to be some people who experience divine hiddenness, divine silence, and/or divine absence, if God existed, this fact would not by itself constitute a refutation of the first-person argument for atheism in this article.

Some practical proposals

To sum up: if God existed, then God would be active in the world, especially among human people. What, exactly, God would (and would not) do, if God existed, however, is not obvious. Careful philosophical and theological reflection is needed here. This article assumed that the claims about what God would do, if God existed, that are defended by philosophers such as Stump, Schellenberg, and Moser, and that are affirmed in some major monotheistic religious traditions, are true or not far from the truth. In general, if God existed, then God would seek what is best for us, and what is best for us would include receiving good things, such as divine consolation in times of severe suffering and divine empowerment to obey God's morally righteous demands, within the context of a conscious and reciprocal relationship with God that is positively meaningful, allows for deep sharing, and is valued for its own sake. The reception of these goods is not something that God can do for us unilaterally, but requires on our part a certain kind of openness to God and willing cooperation with God's morally perfect will. Any person who seeks God and the goods that would necessarily accompany a right relationship with God, in the right ways and for several years, should be in a position to expect an 'encounter' with God. In other words, if God existed, then God would arrange things so that anyone who 'asks', 'searches', and 'knocks', will 'receive', 'find', and encounter the 'opened door'. The basic idea in this article is that any genuine seeker of God who has not encountered God has good private evidence for atheism.

Let us conclude by considering some practical proposals for those who satisfy conditions (i)–(iv) above and accept atheism on the basis of an argument that includes statements (P1)–(P3) above, and for theists who have a justified belief that God exists. If it is rational to hope that God exists, and if we have a moral responsibility to improve ourselves in respect of moral virtue, then agnostics and atheists should continue to do the things that would result in their eventually having religious and morally transforming experiences, if God existed. They ought, for example, to maintain an attitude of due humility, do what they can to form and strengthen a second-order volition to have and to be moved by morally correct desires, and perhaps pray if 'anyone out there' is able and willing to offer some solace and comfort in times of severe suffering, and then 'keep an eye out' for potential surprise evidence for the reality of God. Theists who aim to benefit 'seekers' who believe or suspect that they satisfy conditions (i)–(iv) above, and who are contemplating whether to accept atheism on the basis of an argument that includes statements (P1)–(P3) above, might consider the following. They can offer to help correct any misguided expectations regarding what God would (and would not) do, if God existed, that the seekers might have. They can offer to help detect any unjustified beliefs that the seekers might have about their own attitudes, desires, actions, and/or experiences, if they are in a position to do so. They can testify about God's lovingly intervening in their own experience in unpredictable ways and at unexpected times. And they can strive to become for suffering seekers the loving consolation and encouragement that they believe is willed by God. In the end, however, theists might have to acknowledge the existence of some epistemically justified atheism, and to trust that God, if God exists, will eventually provide these atheists with the kinds of religious and morally transforming experiences that can constitute good evidence for the reality of God.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers and to the philosophy club at College of DuPage for helpful comments on this article.

Conflict of interest. None.

Notes

1. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that I elaborate this point.
2. The term 'Schmod' is used in a different way in O'Leary-Hawthorne & Howard-Snyder (1993). I thank Paul Moser for introducing me to this proposal about coining a new term as a way of bypassing debates about the proper use of the term 'God'.
3. An anonymous reviewer suggests that what Moser (2017) says in response to Aikin (2016) might bear on the problem of a person's waiting 'too long' for divine contact. Moser claims that many atheists could lack divine evidence as a result of their not being sincerely open to making such evidence a priority for their lives and God's not wanting to present such evidence in typical cases where it is opposed, suppressed, ignored, or otherwise discredited. In reply, a person who satisfies conditions (i)–(iv) is, by definition, sufficiently open to God and God's will, and hence, should be in a position to form a justified belief that they are not opposing, suppressing, ignoring, or otherwise discrediting evidence for the reality of God. Moser also claims that given our cognitive limitations relative to God's purposes in self-revelation, we should not expect to know why God hides from people in all or even in most cases. In reply, a person who satisfies conditions (i)–(iv) can, without inconsistency or incoherence, accept this claim. The relevant problem in this article concerns our inability to imagine why God might hide from people who have been sufficiently open to, and desiring of, God and God's will for several years, not our inability to know why God hides from people in 'all or most cases'.
4. An anonymous reviewer points out that a person can always adjust their beliefs to accommodate their reception of surprise evidence. I am inclined to think that such an adjustment can be made in some, but not all, cases. In some cases, the best available epistemic position, given the evidence that a person has just received, might include a belief that God exists.

References

- Aikin SF (2016) Does divine hiding undermine Positive Evidential Atheism? *Religious Studies* 52, 205–212.
- Howard-Snyder D and Green A (2016) Hiddenness of God. In Zalta EN (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/divine-hiddenness>.
- Howard-Snyder D and Moser PK (2002) *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mavrodes GI (1970) *Belief in God: A Study in the Epistemology of Religion*. New York: Random House.
- Moser PK (1989) *Knowledge and Evidence*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Moser PK (2010) *The Evidence for God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Moser PK (2012) Undermining the case for evidential atheism. *Religious Studies* 48, 83–93.
- Moser PK (2017) How not to defend Positive Evidential Atheism. *Religious Studies* 53, 459–465.
- Nagasawa Y (2015) Silence, evil, and Shusaku Endo. In Green A and Stump E (eds), *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 246–259.
- O'Leary-Hawthorne J and Howard-Snyder D (1993) God, Schmod and gratuitous evil. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53, 861–874.
- Schellenberg JL (2015) *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schellenberg JL and Moser PK (2004) Does divine hiddenness justify atheism? In Peterson ML and VanArragon RJ (eds), *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 30–58.
- Stump E (2010) *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tooley M (2015) The problem of evil. In Zalta EN (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/>.

Cite this article: Bartolome A (2023). Private evidence for atheism. *Religious Studies* 59, 97–114. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412522000129>