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## **Religious Skepticism**

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Skepticism comes in many different shapes and sizes. Skeptics have doubted the reality of the external world, (other) minds, God, abstract objects, history, the future, causation, and so on. In addition, skeptics have disavowed various cognitively important states: certainty, knowledge, justified belief, and reliable belief, among others. Skepticism can also come in different strengths. *Modal* skeptics disavow that a cognitive state, such as knowledge, is even possible. *Actuality* skeptics disavow that a cognitive state, such as knowledge, is actual. This is just the beginning of distinctions about skepticism. We won't delay, however, with more taxonomy. Instead, we'll turn directly to religious skepticism and its prospects.

We'll see that religious skepticism is not as easy and comfortable as many philosophers have supposed. In particular, we'll see that we have no easily generalizable support for religious skepticism about the reality of God. Even *if* a person were to lack adequate evidence for God's reality, this person would have no ready way to generalize to the truth of religious skepticism for people in general.

### *Skepticism and Religion*

A version of skepticism is unclear to the extent that its object (namely, what the skepticism is *about*) is unclear. *Religious* skepticism is skepticism about religion. What, however, is religion?

The term “religion” is as unclear as any in the English language. When is something a religion, and when not? The answer is unclear. English language-users sometimes call even a sport or a hobby a religion: “Baseball is his religion,” or “Knitting is her religion.” How, then, could all of the following qualify as religion: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, baseball, knitting? They clearly lack a common goal or object. Perhaps, however, they sometimes share an underlying attitude. That is, a distinctive kind of *commitment* may be common to these diverse phenomena: namely, a *religious* commitment.

We now shift the question. When is a *commitment* religious, and when not? Whatever the answer, this shift redirects skepticism to concern a particular kind of commitment. In doing so, the shift makes skepticism question something about a psychological attitude. Let’s suppose, if only for the sake of discussion, that a commitment is religious for a person if and only if the commitment is intrinsic (that is, not merely instrumental toward something else) and intended to be life-defining (that is, intended to be essential to living) for that person. We can imagine a person for whom baseball or knitting is, however strangely, an object of religious commitment in this sense. (In reality, there are T-shirts in Chicago and elsewhere proclaiming, “Baseball is Life”; see also Evans and Herzog 2002.) Religious skeptics, in this case, would express doubt about a religious commitment. The doubt could concern the commitment in question in this way, for instance: is the commitment ill-advised rather than well-advised? This is a question about value, in effect: is the religious commitment in question *bad* rather than *good*?

Goodness and badness, like many normative realities, come in different species. We can distinguish *moral* goodness, *cognitive* goodness, *prudential* goodness, *aesthetic* goodness, and so on. (For details see Moser 1989, chap. 5; 1993, chap. 4.) Religious skeptics can disavow various

species of value with respect to religious commitment. A religious commitment could be *factually* bad with regard to capturing reality. We may say that it lacks “factual” goodness in that case. A religious commitment could also be *cognitively* bad in virtue of lacking the status of knowledge or of justified belief (perhaps owing to inadequate evidential support, even if it happens to turn out to be factual, i.e., true). In addition, a religious commitment could be *morally* bad in virtue of bringing about moral harm, such as social injustice or individual selfishness. Religious skepticism regarding factual goodness and cognitive goodness has dominated philosophical discussion. It will occupy our attention here.

We’ll set aside *semantical* religious skepticism, the position that dismisses religious claims on the ground that they are semantically meaningless. Nothing whatever speaks in favor of such semantical skepticism regarding prominent religious claims. One could, with as much plausibility, reject religious skepticism on the ground that it is itself semantically defective, that is, meaningless. A certain lack of imagination underlies semantical religious skepticism regarding prominent religious claims. The skeptic who reports that he can’t imagine, for instance, that the God of traditional monotheism exists needs remedial attention in the area of imagining circumstances. The deficiency here lies with the skeptic, not with the semantical status of monotheism. Sometimes this deficiency is accompanied by a dubious approach to semantical meaning, such as Humean empiricism or positivist verificationism about meaning. We are, in any case, well-advised to move on.

The factuality of the object of a religious commitment serves as a common target for religious skeptics. In the case of baseball or knitting, skeptical doubt would be strange indeed. People involved in modern society don’t usually doubt the reality of baseball or knitting. When

they do, we are inclined to question their sanity or at least their sense of humor. A skeptic might introduce global doubt that bears on baseball or knitting, but that would be a dramatic move well beyond religious skepticism. (It would definitely upset baseball and knitting fans too, given the price of admission these days.) We won't wander into that far-flung region where anything whatever seems to go (see Moser 2000, 2004a). Our topic is much closer to home, where our decisions make a very important difference.

For our purposes now, a certain irrelevance characterizes skepticism about religious commitments that have no peculiar object. Consider, for instance, a morality-focused nontheistic religious commitment held by some contemporary proponents of Confucianism. Their religious commitment focuses on moral virtues and has no role for a personal God or any other supernatural object. (This was evidently not the attitude of Confucius himself, for what it's worth.) Suppose that a skeptic questioned the factuality of the object of these Confucianists' religious commitment. This would amount to *moral* skepticism. Our topic, however, is *religious* skepticism that does not reduce to moral skepticism. The most common target of such skepticism is *theistic* religious commitment. As a result, we'll focus on skepticism about theistic religious commitment, in particular, skepticism about its object: God. This focus includes doubt about the reality of God and doubt about the cognitive value of endorsements of God's reality.

### *God and Evidence*

The term "God" is, unfortunately, as unclear as the term "religion." At times it seems that each person has his or her own distinctive understanding of the term. Actually, however, the situation is not quite so fractured. Many people use the term "God" as a *title* that signifies a morally

perfect creator who is worthy of worship and full trust. If the term “God” is a title rather than a name, it can be fully intelligible even if there is no titleholder, that is, even if God does not exist. This use of the term thus allows for the intelligibility of familiar skeptical questions about the existence of God. It also fits with some prominent understandings of the monotheism of Judaism and Christianity. Let’s, then, use the term in that manner, as a preeminent title that may or may not be satisfied by an actual titleholder. To avoid even the appearance of begging the main question against skeptics, I shall typically talk of what God *would* do or be like, where this is short for: *would if God actually exists*.

Religious skeptics about God usually raise doubt that there is a titleholder for the term “God.” This is indeed central to their calling as religious skeptics. Their familiar allegation is that people lack *adequate evidence* (for cognitively reasonable belief) that God exists. This charge is particularly cognitively bold if it concerns *all* people. The allegation is cognitive in that it concerns evidence, and the alleged lack of adequate evidence underlies doubt regarding *the reality* of God, that is, doubt that God exists. These religious skeptics assume that if we lack adequate evidence of the reality of God, then, from a cognitive viewpoint, we should doubt (i.e., suspend judgment) that God exists. If we define “adequate evidence” suitably broadly, this assumption is true and even cognitively compelling. We’ll not quarrel with skeptics on this front.

Belief that God exists would be evidentially arbitrary and thus cognitively irrational in the absence of adequate supporting evidence, even if it is true that God exists. Mere factuality does not yield *cognitive* merit for a person’s belief; many claims are true but still without cognitive merit. So, the requirement of adequate evidence is cognitively impeccable, at least if its notion of adequate evidence is suitably broad and free of unduly narrow empiricist and

rationalist strictures. Since a concern about adequate evidence defines mainline religious skepticism, this essay will be devoted to that concern. We won't be concerned, then, with the question whether theistic belief makes believers feel better.

How should we understand the demand for adequate evidence? Many religious skeptics set the standard very high indeed. One very high standard demands *cognitive reproducibility*. Given this standard, adequate evidence of God's reality must be reproducible either for a single person or for a group of people. If someone asks, for instance, whether I know how to speak English, I can supply the needed evidence *by speaking English*, loud and clear, in the person's presence. In addition, I can reproduce this evidence for myself and for the person in question. I can simply speak English again and again, until my interlocutor yields or departs. I have control over the production of the needed evidence. Given control over evidence, I can meet the demand of cognitive reproducibility. I can even show off with my evidence. So, cognitive control, like control in general, has its ups and downs.

Must evidence be under our control? Certainly not. Much of the original evidence in cosmology, astrophysics, and geology, among other sciences, is neither under our control nor reproducible by us, even if we can supply helpful analogies. We cannot control or reproduce, for instance, the original evidence of the big bang origin of the universe billions of years ago. We lack the power to do so; the original evidence is, literally, beyond our powers of actual reproduction, and we can't change this. Still, the original evidence is real and available to us indirectly. Likewise, if I whisper a secret to you, you have evidence from your experience of hearing my whisper, but you cannot thereby control or reproduce the original evidence (given that you cannot control me and I definitely will not repeat my whisper). The original evidence in

your experience of hearing is real indeed but beyond your control. We should reject, then, any requirement that evidence must be under our control or reproducible by us. As a result, we should reject any skeptical argument assuming that if evidence of God's reality is not reproducible, then it is not genuine evidence. Our receiving evidence can be free of our being able to reproduce that evidence. On reflection, it's amazing that any mature adult would think otherwise. Still, hasty generalization does its damage in this quarter, inspiring and reproducing many wayward religious skeptics.

In popular, and even unpopular, discussions of theism, some skeptics demand "proof" of God's existence, sometimes without clarification of what they mean by the dangerous word "proof." (In these discussions, "proof" is a fighting word, pure and simple.) Let's define "proof," for the sake of intelligibility, as a deductively valid argument with true premises. Must adequate evidence of God's reality include such an argument? Certainly not. Very little of the evidence for what we know includes deductively valid argument. Most of our empirical knowledge, for instance, rests on evidence free of deductively valid arguments. Likewise, most of your knowledge about yourself and about other people does not arise from proof. Typically proof resides in the domains of logic and mathematics, but the claim that God exists is definitely not a claim of logic or mathematics. God, by hypothesis, is a personal agent, not an axiom or a theorem; it's a serious category mistake to suppose otherwise. In addition, we lack not only proof but also adequate evidence for thinking that adequate evidence of God's existence must include proof as just defined. Let's not be hindered, then, by any skeptical demand for proof of God's existence. Instead, we'll let the relevant *notion* of God guide the suitable cognitive

parameters. Otherwise, we risk begging some important questions about God's reality and evidence thereof.

Evidence of God's reality, by definition, is evidence of the reality of a morally perfect creator who is worthy of worship and full trust. Where might we find such evidence? In nature? In history? In books? In ourselves? Probably not on TV talk shows; the noise level is much too high. People have looked far and wide for evidence of God, even in their free time, and skeptics typically remain unconvinced. Famously, Bertrand Russell (1970) anticipated his response if after death he met God: "God, you gave us insufficient evidence." That sounds blaming, to put it mildly. Russell might have considered a bit more modesty in the presence of an all-knowing God. At any rate, we now face a question widely neglected by religious skeptics. If God would choose to give us evidence of God's reality, what parameters, or defining features, for the evidence would God observe?

It's not obvious that if God exists, God *owes* us evidence of God's reality, just as God would not be morally obligated to redeem humans. At least it's not clear what would yield such an evidential obligation on God's part. If we assume that God would be inherently merciful even toward enemies, however, we may assume that God's character would incline (but not morally obligate) God to give us, in our desperate situation, evidence of God's reality. If we assume, accordingly, that God would choose to give us such evidence, we should ask about the parameters for this evidence.

Clearly, the evidence would have to be suitable to God's character as morally perfect and worthy of worship. If, for instance, we were to face a world of *nothing but* unrelenting pain and suffering, we would have some evidence against God's reality. We would then have some

evidence against the reality of a God who truly cares for humans, and we would have no positive indication of a God who truly cares for us. The actual world, though deeply troubled and torn, is clearly not a world of nothing but unrelenting pain and suffering. It has its silver, if subtle, lining of good, even when its evil seems to have a monopoly. Consider, for instance, a mother joyously caring for her newborn child. That's a silver lining indeed, if anything is.

What would evidence suitable to God's character look like? In other words, what kind of evidence would fit with the reality of a God worthy of worship? Here is a vague answer: any kind of evidence indicating that God, as a morally perfect spirit worthy of worship, is real. This doesn't help much at all. Let's consider a more specific question: what kind of evidence would be given to us by a morally perfect God worthy of worship? The answer depends on what God would intend to do with the world, and God's intention would depend on how the world actually stands in relation to God's purposes for it. In any case, it would be God's prerogative to reveal the things of God *in God's preferred ways* (in keeping, of course, with God's character). We must beware, then, of uncritically demanding that (evidence of) God's reality must meet *our* preferred standards of evidence. Instead, our evidential demands must be attentive to what would be God's nature and resulting purposes. Russell and many other religious skeptics have overlooked this basic cognitive lesson. As we'll see, it's an uncomfortable lesson indeed for such skeptics.

### *God and Judgment*

Let's move further from abstraction to specificity, so as not to languish in sterile generalities (an occupational hazard in academic, especially philosophical, discussions of "God"). The God of

Jewish-Christian monotheism is widely disavowed by religious skeptics. Even so, many Jews and Christians regard this God as worthy of worship and thus as all-loving and inherently good. So, in the absence of a better candidate, we'll give some attention to the nature of this God. This God, we are told, seeks to redeem, to revive, a world alienated from its creator and thereby gripped by moral failure and personal dying and death. The alienation of humans arises, at least in part, from their selfish willfulness, their asserting their own wills in conflict with what is, or at least would be, willed by the all-loving God. All of human life is surrounded by this alienation and tainted by it too. We'll pursue this approach to God, to see if it can answer and even challenge religious skeptics.

We won't simply assume that the Jewish-Christian God exists. That would gain nothing. Instead, we'll ask what we should expect cognitively regarding God if this God exists. We can then ask if our world and our experience fit well with this expectation. We'll then be able to ask where our evidence actually points.

Skeptics are very rarely, if ever, challenged by a case for the God of deism or minimal theism. We'll move beyond minimal theism, and look for the consequences for religious skepticism. Let's continue then, if only for the sake of argument, with the story of robust monotheism found in Jewish and Christian theism. If we ignore this story, for the sake of attenuated, minimal theism, we'll fail to appreciate the bearing of robust theism on religious skepticism. Settling for minimal theism, philosophers often miss this opportunity, but we'll seize it here. At least we'll then apprehend what kind of theism is in question or, instead, putting us in question. Such a reversal of who is judging and who has a right to judge is characteristic of robust Jewish-Christian monotheism. It takes any sophomoric easiness out of skepticism.

Humans, as a group, seek their ultimate security and contentment from things other than God, typically from things in the world that seem to offer satisfaction. The familiar list goes on and on: health, wealth, survival, education, family, reputation, physical appearance, entertainment, self-serving religion, sexuality, human friendship, and so on. In perfect love, God would place the world under judgment to try to save people from dying with their idols, their insecure replacements for God. God would try to bring people to recognize the ultimate futility of the idols offered by the world apart from God. This would be integral to the attempted divine redemption, or salvation, of humans.

The theme of divine *judgment* is Christian as well as Jewish. For instance, the apostle Paul (a Jewish Christian) echoes a theme from Ecclesiastes:

... the creation was subjected to futility, not by its own will, but by the will of the One who subjected it, in [this One's] hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Romans 8: 20-21).

Many religious skeptics have raised doubts about God's existence on the basis of the reality of extensive pain and suffering in our world. They doubt that an all-loving God would allow the pain and suffering in this world. Of course, we humans are not (nor should we expect ourselves to be) in a position to explain why all the pain and suffering in this world occur, or are allowed to occur. Our explanatory and cognitive resources are much too limited for the difficult task.

Even so, we can consider that some pain and suffering result from the way that creation has been “subjected to futility.”

The created world, according to Jewish-Christian monotheism, was made to break down, as in the case of physical entropy, in order that (according to God’s hope) all observers would learn that their lasting security and contentment will not be found in any part of the created world. Lasting security and contentment must be found elsewhere, and, according to the apostle Paul, “the children of God” will find it in God rather than in the created world. They would then be liberated from the idols of this world. We can thus make some sense of why an all-loving God would allow certain kinds of pain and suffering. God’s hope that people be liberated from deadly idols could make good use of allowing pain and suffering among us rather than protecting us from all pain and suffering. This would be part of God’s redemptive judgment. God could still reserve His decisive judgment for a special redemptive situation: the innocent sacrificial death of God’s unique Son, Jesus (on which see Moser 2007a).

The prospect of divine redemptive judgment bears importantly on our acquiring evidence of God’s reality. As part of creation, humans too would be under divine judgment for their selfish, anti-God ways. So, we should expect that our coming to know God’s reality would have a central place for divine judgment of us and our self-serving ways. We humans are ourselves our most common idol, even though we obviously can’t supply lasting security and contentment for ourselves. We can’t even supply lasting subsistence for ourselves. This is painfully obvious, if anything is. As a result, in redemptive love, God would subject *us* to futility owing to our pretensions of self-reliance. This futility would include our impending physical death, when we will meet our end in this world. God’s hope, out of redemptive love, would be that we see the

futility of our self-reliance and come to our senses, thereby turning to trust in God. Evidence of God's reality would fit with such divine hope. We'll consider how.

The God of deism, the cosmic watchmaker, would perhaps settle for providing us with evidence that the God of deism exists. This God would have no message of redemptive judgment, but would be content to have people acknowledge, on the basis of evidence from creation, that the creator exists. The Jewish-Christian God would not be reduced to the God of deism; the former would, in redemptive love, intervene too much for the latter. In addition, the Jewish-Christian God would not be impressed at all with belief that God exists. The epistle of James, one of the most Jewish writings in the New Testament, makes a related point regarding mere belief that the God of Jewish-Christian monotheism exists: "Even the demons believe [that God is one], and shudder" (James 2:19). The Jewish-Christian God would seek a human response that goes beyond belief, and even knowledge, that God exists. The distinctive evidence provided by this God would contribute to that goal. We'll see below what this goal would include. Philosophers and religious skeptics typically miss this crucial lesson, but we'll give it full attention. Otherwise, we'll fail to give robust monotheism a fair hearing. It rarely gets a fair hearing from religious skeptics or from philosophers. In the interest of such a fair hearing, we'll make things uncomfortable for ourselves.

### *Spectator vs. Authoritative Evidence*

The Jewish-Christian God, unlike the God of deism, would not approach us as people who will fully welcome evidence of the reality of God. The evidence in question concerns a God who, out of unselfish love, would challenge our selfish, deadly ways. We would not start out as friends of

this God. We rather would be at odds with this God, owing to our selfish ways. The notion of “enemies” of God readily comes to mind. The Jewish-Christian God would thus come to us with redemptive judgment of us and our ways, for our own good. (We won’t confuse such judgment with destructive *condemnation*; there’s a big difference between the two.) So, this God would not come to us with *spectator evidence*, that is, evidence not demanding that its recipients yield their wills to the source of the evidence.

Instead, the God in question would come to us with *authoritative evidence*, that is, evidence demanding that we yield our wills to the source of the evidence in question. Indeed, this God would come with *perfect* authoritative evidence: evidence demanding that we yield our wills to the perfect source of the evidence in question, that is, God. (A merely human moral leader might offer us authoritative evidence by making a demand on our wills, but this would fall short of perfect authoritative evidence.) The God in question, then, would be no friend of cognitive voyeurism regarding divine reality, given the demand that we yield our wills to God’s perfect will. So, this God would be at odds with ordinary philosophical and skeptical ways of approaching the question of evidence of God’s existence. This God would recognize that human inquirers suffer volitional (will-related) as well as cognitive impediments. (For elaboration on this theme, see Moser 2002.)

Religious skeptics typically miss the main aim suitable to the Jewish-Christian God when they demand that God provide spectator evidence. They overlook that, faced with our world, the morally perfect titleholder of “God” would be (*if* He chooses to save us) a God of redemption who comes to us, not with spectator evidence, but rather with perfect authoritative evidence. Spectator evidence from God would allow God to be domesticated and taken for granted by us in

our self-serving ways. Such evidence would thus risk serious harm to us and fail as a means of genuine redemption. In choosing to redeem us, the true God would be a God of perfect authoritative evidence. So, this God would have a definite purpose beyond our knowing that God exists: the purpose of bringing us into loving and obedient fellowship with God. We should thus expect the titleholder of “God” to offer evidence of God’s reality, if any is offered, that advances this redemptive purpose. Divine redemption need not be comfortable for us in its being good for us. On the contrary, we should expect it to exceed our comfort zone.

The main problem of divine redemption would be that we need to be saved from ourselves. We would need to be saved from our deadly self-reliance into obedient trust (on God’s terms) of the God who could save us from our selfishness and impending personal death. (For elaboration on this twofold human predicament, in connection with evidence of God’s reality, see Moser 2007b.) Unlike spectator evidence, perfect authoritative evidence would attend to this predicament. It would thus work by *cognitive grace*, a free, unmerited gift from God, rather than by any human earning that obligates God. It would counter our powers of intellectual earning in order to deflate intellectual pride. It would thus demonstrate our weakness, our self-inadequacy, regarding finding the true God on our own. The God of perfect authoritative evidence thus would not fit well with the god of the philosophers and the natural theologians. (On the significance of cognitive grace, see Moser 2006.)

We could not think or reason our way to the Jewish-Christian God by our own resources, as if we did not need a revelation from this God via perfect authoritative evidence. The true God would be too different from us, in terms of moral character and cognitive subtlety and depth, to be at our convenient cognitive disposal. So, we must contrast (a) the attempt to argue our way to

knowledge of God's reality on our own with (b) our need to receive perfect authoritative evidence from God's free, unearned call to us to live as God's dependent children. This lesson is altogether foreign to how philosophers, including skeptics, typically think of evidence, but this does not count against its truth at all. Instead, it ultimately yields, we'll see, a new challenge to religious skeptics. As I suggested, the things of God need not be comfortable for us.

God Himself would need to supply the perfect authoritative evidence of God's reality, since God alone would be perfectly authoritative and have the prerogative to decide, in accordance with perfect divine character, what exactly this evidence is. According to many first-century Jewish-Christians, God chose to supply perfect authoritative evidence through His divine Son, Jesus of Nazareth. This evidence, according to these Christians, was ratified by God's own Spirit, the Holy Spirit. (On the epistemological role of God's Spirit, see Moser 2003.) In John's Gospel, Jesus characterizes the cognitive and moral role of God's Spirit as follows:

When [the Spirit] comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.... [W]hen he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. (John 16: 8,13-14, NIV)

God's own Spirit, according to this portrait, has the cognitive role of making things known regarding God and Jesus. Jesus is presented as God's unique revealer who calls us (a) to receive God's Spirit of redemption through trust (that is, faith) in God and (b) thereby to live as God's

beloved dependent children. This theme emerges elsewhere in the New Testament, including 1 Cor. 2: 11-12, Rom. 8: 14-16; cf. Matt. 16: 16-17. It captures what Jesus is all about, and has, as we'll see, revolutionary cognitive implications. We've entered strange cognitive territory, where the true God may lurk. We do well to linger here a bit, to examine the evidential situation.

God's Spirit, on the portrait under review, would "lead" people to Jesus and his Father as their Lord and their God, and this experience of "being led" in this way would be cognitively significant indeed. It would include the perfect authoritative call to relinquish our own selfish willfulness for the unselfish will of the living God. This call would work through conscience, and would not be reducible to spectator evidence. It would come with moral challenge, even if we dislike and dismiss it. (On the role of conscience in God's call, see Forsyth 1912.) Our failure to hear this authoritative call may be the result of our not wanting to hear it on God's terms of unselfish love. We often prefer, for instance, *not* to have to forgive, to be thankful for, or to love our enemies. (Check any daily newspaper.) It seems easier, or at least more in our own interest, to suppress and ignore any call from God for us to live as dependent children of God who reflect, if imperfectly, perfect divine love. God's call of perfect love would be anything but comfortable, given our selfish ways. Still, goodness does not reduce to comfort.

In our familiar skeptical moments, we tend to ask: God, are You there? Are You truly *with us*? Instead, in redemptive love, God would ask us: Are you truly *with Me*, in your will as well as in your thought? If we are not, spectator evidence of God's reality would only domesticate God's sacred reality, as it would not challenge us to submit to God as the Lord of our lives. The providing of such spectator evidence would be akin to what Jesus called "casting pearls before swine." Only harm would be done, as God would become at best a cognitive idol

for us, an object of cognitive voyeurism to be used by us as *we* wish. We have enough such idols. For the sake of redemptive love, God would preserve his holy love and not trivialize it as if knowing God were an optional spectator sport. As a result, in redemptive judgment, God would hide His ways from those who are “wise and intelligent” on their own terms (cf. Matt. 11: 25-27; 1 Cor. 1: 19-21). He would find nothing to gain in revealing Himself to prideful supposed cognitive superiors.

Perfect authoritative evidence, we have noted, would demand that we yield our wills to the perfect source of the evidence in question, namely, God. Such demanding would be a *call* to us to yield to God. It would require a personal source, an intentional agent, who has a will and a purpose. In this case, the purpose would be to have us yield to God’s life-giving will as opposed to our own deadly selfish willfulness. Impersonal evidence, then, cannot be perfect (or imperfect) authoritative evidence; it lacks the needed will and call. The kind of evidence offered by familiar first-cause, design, and ontological arguments for God’s existence is impersonal and thus not perfect authoritative evidence. It lacks a demand, a call, to yield our selfish willfulness to the unselfish will of God. It thus is spectator evidence, and leaves us with no challenge from God. This is not the kind of evidence an all-loving God of redemption would supply; it’s extraneous to what would be God’s redemptive purpose.

The first challenge for us from an all-loving God would be a call to *repent*: to turn our wills toward God’s unselfish, all-loving will that offers everlasting life with God. In receiving God’s will as preeminent, we would acknowledge God as our God, as Lord of our lives. We would thereby acknowledge our status as creatures dependent on God. In that case, *we should* renounce our pretensions to be in charge of our lives, although the aforementioned

acknowledgment does not make such renunciation automatic. My knowing, here as elsewhere, does not entail my yielding my will to another will. Authoritative evidence from God would come with a call to repent, a demand to yield to God. It would thus differ in kind from the types of spectator evidence familiar to traditional natural theology and philosophy of religion. In fact, traditional natural theology and philosophy of religion have neglected authoritative evidence, including perfect authoritative evidence, for the sake of spectator evidence. As a result, religious skeptics have not been adequately challenged. We are in the process of correcting this deficiency now.

Spectator evidence makes it too easy for people to run away from any authoritative call from God. We can assess spectator evidence without assessing who we would be before God, that is, people under God's redemptive judgment. Spectator evidence easily allows us to ignore any divine call to us to repent of our selfish willfulness for the sake of God's all-loving will. It thus easily allows us to ignore what would be a redemptive God's main purpose for us: to be made new by the power of God's will as we die to our selfish willfulness and live as God's dependent children. Spectator evidence easily allows us to treat God as just another undisturbing object of our intellectual reflection. It thus allows us easily to ignore any God of redemptive judgment. It replaces any such God with a deadly idol, typically a reflection of ourselves. Our self-made gods end up looking a lot like us.

How exactly would God call us to repent? This is a dangerous question, if it assumes that we are in a position to explain how exactly God would work in the world with regard to God's self-revelation. Clearly, given our serious cognitive limitations, we have no reason to suppose that we are in such a position. A recurring theme of Jewish-Christian theism is that we are not in

such a position (see, for example, Job 38-40; John 3: 7-8; 1 Cor. 2: 6-16). God's ways of self-revelation would often leave us without an exact explanation of how the self-revelation arose. On reflection, this is not surprising at all. An all-loving redemptive God would be committed to self-revelation but not thereby to revealing an exact *explanation* of how the self-revelation arose. The former does not require the latter. God could call us to repent, for instance, and leave us in the explanatory dark regarding how exactly God calls us to repent. Explanatory how-questions, then, can be misleading regarding God's ways, owing to a false assumption about our explanatory and cognitive resources. This lesson parallels a more familiar lesson about explanatory why-questions regarding God's ways, particularly regarding why God would allow evil. (On the parallel lesson about evil, see Howard-Snyder 1996.)

Even so, we are not completely in the dark regarding what could be God's ways of making demands on us. We are all familiar, for instance, with moral demands found in our conscience. Some of these demands go against our own preferences; they do not arise from our individual wills or even the common will of our peer group. We see a clear example of this in the case of a lone moral reformer who, after having had his or her own will morally corrected, speaks against societal racism or some other widespread injustice. Some of the Hebrew prophets may fall into this category. Some of our own peers may too; Mother Teresa of Calcutta readily comes to mind. The moral demands found in conscience can serve as ways for God's will to be communicated to us. We must use discernment toward the various demands of conscience, however, since our conscience can be corrupted and confused. Still, the presence of bad input does not preclude the presence of good input. It would be unreasonable, even logically fallacious, to suppose otherwise.

Divine use of perfect authoritative evidence could account for God's appearing at times to be cognitively subtle, elusive, and even hidden. (On the relevance of divine hiddenness to atheism, see Moser 2004b; cf. Moser 2002.) When we disregard perfect authoritative evidence, perhaps for the sake of more comfortable spectator evidence, we make ourselves impervious to what would be evidence characteristic of God's reality. We then become unsuited to receive the authoritative evidence in question, in much the way that our refusing to open our eyes would block much salient perceptual evidence from reaching us. In excluding perfect authoritative evidence, we would risk harm, even to ourselves, because we would exclude any good, life-giving creator-creature relationship God offers us. To the extent that we block perfect authoritative evidence of God, God would appear (at best) to be cognitively subtle, elusive, and even hidden. Is, then, the key cognitive shortcoming with *religious skeptics* rather than with God? Religious skeptics rarely, if ever, consider this question seriously. This deficiency typically stems from inadequate cognitive modesty regarding the question of God's existence. Appropriate cognitive modesty requires that we be open to what would be God's self-revelation *on God's terms*, even if God's terms take us beyond comfortable spectator evidence to perfect authoritative evidence.

### *Volitional Knowledge of God*

Spectator evidence is *volitionally casual* in that it does not demand that we yield our wills to the source of such evidence. In this regard, it allows for volitional promiscuity. Spectator evidence of God would thus allow casual access to God, with no demand on our wills relative to God's

will. It would thereby neglect God's status as supremely and perfectly normative for us, in terms of the direction of our wills.

We now can ask: Why does the human will matter at all in our receiving evidence of God's reality? The answer is found in what would be an all-loving God's redemptive purpose, if such a God were to choose to redeem humans. This purpose would include our *volitionally knowing God as perfectly authoritative Lord*: that is, knowing God as Lord in a way that one submits, even if imperfectly, to God as the One whose will is supreme and perfect. Such volitional knowing would not approach God as a self-serving idol made in our own image. Instead, it would include submission to God as volitionally supreme and perfect. As long as I would refuse to acknowledge God's will as supremely and perfectly normative for us, I would refuse to acknowledge God as God. In addition, as long as I would refuse to submit to God as the One whose will is supreme and perfect, I would thereby block myself from volitionally knowing God as perfectly authoritative Lord. This would interfere both with the aforementioned divine redemptive purpose and with the receiving of any evidence of divine reality in keeping with that purpose.

We find a suitable cognitive (as well as ethical) model in Jesus's reported response to God in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Not what I will, but what You will" (Mk. 14:36). This was no casual concession to God. Jesus was conceding to God his upcoming tortuous death by Roman crucifixion. He was yielding his will, even his very life, completely to God as One whose will is supreme and perfect. Such yielding of one's will to God does not entail extinguishing one's own will, or being left without a will; it is rather a matter of conforming one's will to God's will. If we recast the appropriation of divine evidence volitionally, on the Gethsemane

model, we are left with epistemology *sub specie crucis*: a manner of volitionally knowing God as Lord that requires will-yielding to God of the sort exemplified by Jesus on his way to the cross. This volitional cognitive model is hinted at in the remark attributed to Jesus in John 7:17: “If anyone wills to do God's will, he will know whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.”

Willingness to submit to God, if imperfectly, is central to volitionally knowing God as perfectly authoritative Lord. It is the avenue to knowledge of God's reality on the basis of perfect authoritative evidence. In seeking to be known volitionally as God (rather than as an object of casual speculation or voyeurism), an all-loving God would tailor evidence of God's reality to the volitional yielding of potential knowers. This would advance God's redemptive aim to transform selfish human wills without domesticating evidence of God's sacred reality. Even if volitional factors figure in knowing humans as persons, we have no basis for yielding to other humans as *perfectly* authoritative. God alone, given a perfect moral character, would merit such submission.

Volitional knowledge of God as perfectly authoritative calls for a cognitive taxonomy that goes beyond the familiar options of rationalism and empiricism. Rationalism about knowledge of God implies that human reason is the source of knowledge of God, whereas empiricism about knowledge of God implies that human (sensory or perceptual) experience is the source of knowledge of God. *Volitionalism*, in contrast, implies that the human will is a central source of proper knowledge of God. More accurately, it implies that the yielding of the human will to (the demand of) perfect authoritative evidence from God is a central source (*within humans*) of proper knowledge of God. (God, of course, would be the *superhuman* origin

of human knowledge of God.) Volitionalism thus gives a role to perfect authoritative evidence that is neglected by rationalism and empiricism. It excludes the dominance of spectator evidence found in rationalism and empiricism.

### *Skeptical Worries and Tests*

Skeptics will doubtless ask how we are to test for the reliability of perfect authoritative evidence. The question seems plausible, but we must be cautious not to impose tests at odds conceptually with what is being tested: the reality of an all-loving God who would challenge us with perfect authoritative evidence. If we aim to make an all-loving God jump through hoops of our own making, we are bound to be disappointed. Such a God would not play our intellectual games, given that our intellectual games (including the ways we set our cognitive standards) typically insulate us from being challenged by God.

God would not owe any human the role of a supposedly neutral judge over God, even in the cognitive domain. In addition, God would not owe humans spectator evidence of divine reality *before* He makes authoritative demands on them. Humans do indeed need evidence of who God is, but an all-loving God could, and would, supply all needed evidence in a context of perfect authoritative evidence. This would be in keeping with a divine redemptive plan to transform human wills rather than to leave us as dying selfish spectators.

Religious skeptics, in agreement with many advocates of natural theology, will insist that we begin with mere “existence-arguments” concerning God. This, however, seems misguided. In the case of an all-loving God, the crucial cognitive role of essence, character, and value must not be bracketed for the sake of mere existence-arguments. The present approach holds these

together, thus preserving the explanatory, psychological, and existential richness of evidence that would be supplied by an all-loving God who opts for human redemption. Genuine existence-evidence regarding the Jewish-Christian God would come not as a needed preliminary to, but instead directly *through*, the good news of what God has done for us and demands of us by way of redemption. The ground for this approach is straightforward: proper conviction of God's reality would come via perfect authoritative evidence that challenges humans to yield to the transforming power of an all-loving God. So, robust monotheism would begin not with mere existence-evidence but rather with perfect authoritative evidence that purportedly calls people to submit to God as perfectly authoritative Lord. Such an approach will avoid the risk of being diverted to deism or mere theism. It will also avoid the implausible result that a person must be able to follow intricate arguments to receive evidence of God's reality.

Some religious skeptics will worry that perfect authoritative evidence would not include a non-questionbegging argument for God's reality. This, however, is no real problem, because the reality of evidence, even evidence adequate for the justification-condition for knowledge, does not depend on a non-questionbegging argument or on an argument of any kind. For example, suppose that I don't have a non-questionbegging argument for my belief that I am thinking now, at least relative to an extreme skeptic's thoroughgoing questions. Still, I have cognitively good evidence from my current experience, which is not an argument of any sort, that I am thinking now. (In addition, as it happens, I *am* thinking now.) The unbridled skeptical demand for "argument" of a preferred sort often blinds skeptics from seeing that "evidence" is not automatically reducible to an argument (see Moser 1989).

Whether an argument is non-questionbegging may vary with the variable interrogative features of an exchange, namely, with the questions actually raised in an exchange. Evidence itself, however, is not exchange-sensitive in this way. A person's *having* evidence does not entail *giving* an answer of any kind. So, we should not be troubled if we lack a non-questionbegging argument relative to an extreme skeptic's questions (see Moser 2004a for problems facing extreme skepticism and a non-questionbegging reply to such skepticism). We should rather invite skeptics to consider the kind of evidence suitable to a personal loving God who would seek redemptive transformation rather than mere reasonable belief.

Acknowledgment of an all-loving God with redemptive purposes can yield unsurpassed genuine explanatory value in certain areas of inquiry (for details see Moser 2002, pp. 121-25). Such an acknowledgment, we could argue, makes the best sense of, among other things, who we are and of why we have come into existence. The cognitive reasonableness of robust theistic belief may thus be recommended as underwritten by an inference to a best genuine explanation on the basis of the whole range of our experience. Still, the non-inferential, foundational evidence of God's reality would be irreducibly a matter of experiencing what seems to be the presence of God's perfectly authoritative personal Spirit. This experience would not be an argument of any kind. Being akin to attention-attraction by God's authoritative presence, it would be experiential acquaintance with what seems to be God's authoritative call on a person's life. If the best genuine explanation of such experience is that an all-loving God has actually intervened in human experience, we have the resources for an argument for the cognitive reasonableness of robust theism. Still, the perfect authority would rest in God, not in our argument. Of course, not just any call would qualify as divine. If a call promotes hate, it is not

from an all-loving God. False gods can compete with the true God, and they would be known relative to the standard of perfect unselfish love as a corrective to our natural ways. This standard will leave us with very few candidates, and perhaps only one candidate, if any. Many familiar candidates will fail at the start, but we won't digress to naming names. Instead, readers can decide in their free time which popular gods fail the test.

God could be put to the test as long as the test is fitting. Likewise, even more obviously, we humans can be put to the test too. Some immediate test questions for us humans are: (1) Are we *willing* to hear an all-loving God's challenging call to us, including a call for enemy-love and enemy-forgiveness? (2) Are we *willing* to engage in the attentive listening and discernment integral to hearing God's challenging call? (3) Are we *willing* to be judged and then remade by the power of God's holy, unselfish love? (4) Are we *willing*, even in our own lives, to let God be God, that is, the Lord whose will is normatively supreme and perfect for us? If we honestly answer yes to these questions, we can fruitfully begin to seek (to "test for") God's reality. We can then sincerely ask whether there is a sacred space deep within us, beneath the noise and the chatter of this dying world. This would be a place where we could hear the very voice of God, the perfectly authoritative but "still, small voice" that seemingly challenged the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 19:12), among many other prophets, and visited Jesus on many occasions. We can then pursue the attentive and willing listening that would enable us to hear God's perfectly authoritative call to us to be changed, by divine power, from the inside out. This call would, of course, fit with God's all-loving character (and so would not promote murder, hate, or even selfish anger), and it would have a perfect authority foreign to us. Its perfect authority would be palpable, when one's conscience is receptive.

In the end, God's own perfect authority would answer our suitable test questions, if anything would. Otherwise, we would be faced with a cognitive authority higher than God and thus a rejection of God's supreme authority, including supreme cognitive authority. God would then no longer be God. God would then be under the supposed alternative cognitive authority. My position on divine authority does not give God absolutely free cognitive reign, however, as if *whatever* God happened to will would be cognitively acceptable. The point instead is that God's cognitive authority would proceed by the perfect authority of God's own genuinely all-loving character. Evidence of God's reality would fit with this perfect authority, the authority of God's own perfect character. So, we have no cognitive analogue to the Plato's Euthyphro problem here, where mere willing would create merit. God's all-loving perfect character, rather than an arbitrary will, would have ultimate perfect authority. (The next section returns to this point.)

The plot thickens, as it typically does in matters cognitive. Humans may be largely spiritually blind and deaf relative to the perfect standard of an all-loving God. So, humans may be in need of *God* to open their eyes and ears to receive adequately the authoritative evidence of God's reality. We may see vague glimmers and hear muted echoes of God's reality, but we may need God to give us new eyes to see and ears to hear aright. We may need cognitive help *from God* in our coming to know God, and we may need to ask for such help. God would thus be indispensable as our helper even regarding our suitably receiving evidence of God's reality. It wouldn't follow that we risk a circular argument, since we're concerned with evidence more basic than an argument. Skeptics have consistently avoided consideration of this live option. We have here a serious cognitive blind spot among skeptics. I suspect that it's anchored in volitional leanings characteristic of skeptics.

The evidential glimmers and echoes of God's reality may strike us more or less vaguely, but we would need to recruit God's help to receive the evidence aright, with spiritual eyes and ears supplied by God. We would have to trust God's provision even in the case of our suitably apprehending evidence of divine reality. God would be Lord, then, even over our appropriately receiving evidence of God's reality. That's a cognitive option worthy of a skeptic's careful attention. We would thus be in a position of genuine cognitive need and dependence, even if we think otherwise. This would fit with the aim of an all-loving God to affirm our status as (at least cognitively) dependent creatures and to challenge our prideful pretensions, including any veiled pretensions to divinity. These pretensions of self-reliance and self-assertion emerge particularly in cognitive areas of life, where we readily take self-credit and easily overlook that an all-loving God would operate by grace, or unmerited gift, rather than by any human earning that obligates God. The tyranny of human earning dies hard in cognitive and other areas of human life.

### *Trust, Distrust, and Skeptics*

An all-loving God who seeks redemption would aim to build human trust in God *on God's terms*. Could, however, the God in question *be* reliably trusted? If so, trusted with what? With satisfying our desires and delivering us from all evil now? Clearly not. Our desires are not fully satisfied, and we all face evil and its effects, each and every day. (No reminder needed here.) In addition, we shall all undergo physical death some day. What, then, could God be trusted *for*? Religious skeptics might say: *nothing*. In any case, they doubt, more or less loudly, that the God in question actually exists.

The best answer is: God could be trusted for what He has *actually promised*. One promise from the Jewish-Christian God stands out: the promise to remain with His human children in everlasting life as He frees them from deadly idols by bringing them into volitional conformity with his self-giving crucified and resurrected Son, Jesus. Contrary to much popular religion, this does *not* include a promise to save God's human children from pain, suffering, tragedy, or physical death. It is rather a promise of God's abiding and transforming presence with God's people, come what may. Many people want something else, and thus have no interest in any such divine promise. This could easily create a serious cognitive disconnect between these people and God. Misguided expectations could blind people from seeing God's reality.

Skeptics will ask: why accept any such answer regarding God's reliability? Part of the answer has already emerged. Clearly, we cannot give spectator evidence of God to skeptics; nor should we expect or want to be able to do so. Instead, we should consider whether perfect authoritative evidence regarding God is actually available. Such evidence would call people to trust, and to be volitionally conformed to, an all-loving God, even in the face of pain, suffering, tragedy, and physical death. It would call people to trust God with regard to *His all-loving promises* rather than our (often confused and fleeting) desires. The perfect authoritative evidence would come from God's aforementioned Spirit, the same Spirit that reportedly led Jesus into his notorious trials in the wilderness, in Gethsemane, and on Calvary.

The question now facing skeptics is: are they *willing* to hear any authoritative divine call and, if they experience it, to come to trust God? Or, alternatively, is their *unwillingness* to do so interfering somehow with their appropriating the needed authoritative evidence of God's reality? Have they put themselves in a cognitive position unfavorable to receiving the distinctive

evidence? At a minimum, skeptics must honestly face such questions, however unfamiliar they are to their ordinary ways of thinking. The removal of cognitive blind spots among skeptics could allow for much illumination.

Contrary to our familiar ways, the Jewish-Christian God would promote a grand divide between (a) what God has done for us (and is to be received as a gift by trust in God) and (b) what we have accomplished on our own relative to earning security with God in a way that obligates God. This is the divide between divine grace (or, unmerited gift) and human earning. This divide allows that God can work through our wills and intellects, but it disallows that we “earn” our cognitive standing before God in a way that we obligate God. In the cognitive domain, contrary to familiar philosophical thinking, an all-loving God would be revealed by grace rather than by human earning. The reason is straightforward: an all-loving God would seek to deflate human pride, boasting, and self-credit, and to promote instead ultimate trust in the only One who can sustain humans in life. This would be part of God’s redemptive purpose toward humans. Evidence of God’s reality would be suited to this divine purpose. It would thus be perfect authoritative evidence initiated by God (without human earning), and it would thereby call for volitional knowledge of God as perfectly authoritative Lord. This plausible consideration is rarely, if ever, considered at all by skeptics and philosophers in general. We are undoing this deficiency now.

The kind of ultimate trust promoted by an all-loving God would be doubly ultimate: *purposively* ultimate and *cognitively* ultimate. Purposively ultimate trust in God would not be *merely* a means to another end. One might trust God as a means to various other ends (including health, wealth, or survival), but purposively ultimate trust in God would not depend on such

instrumental trust. It would be trust in God as an end in itself, for its own sacred value. Such trust would exclude trusting in God *solely* as a means to another end. Cognitively ultimate trust in God would not depend for its cognitive support (or, evidence) on anything other than God's perfectly authoritative, trust-building voice revealed to a person. Such trust may still require the absence of defeaters (such as equally illuminating opposing voices), but this would not be a requirement on the (positive) cognitive support for trust in God. The absence of defeaters does not amount to or entail positive cognitive support. As ultimately authoritative on all fronts, owing to the perfect authority of a divine all-loving character, God would be in a unique position to demand and to build cognitively ultimate trust in Himself. In contrast with imperfect humans, God would not need another voice or standard to authenticate His own perfectly authoritative voice. A regress of needed authoritative voices or standards thus fails to threaten. Skeptics will find no skeptical foothold here.

Cognitively ultimate trust may be called *foundational* trust. We can ask the following question to illuminate such trust. Whose voice is cognitively primary for me: my voice or God's? We can put a similar question in different terms. Which personal relationship is cognitively primary for me: my relationship with myself or my relationship with God? (Philosophers rarely take up this question; still, the question is vitally important.) Clearly, if I don't even hear or acknowledge God's authoritative voice, God's voice will not be cognitively primary for me. The natural skeptical response is to infer that there is (at least in all likelihood) no voice of God to be heard at all. The cognitively more careful response is to ask first: am I somehow blocking myself from hearing God's perfectly authoritative voice? If I have set myself against trusting God, owing to a preference to trust *myself* instead, I'll be disinclined to hear or acknowledge God's

authoritative voice. I'll then prefer to ignore it. Religious skeptics should examine whether they are in just that cognitive position relative to God. They must ask whether they suffer a *cognitive* deficiency owing to their resistance to God's perfect authority in the cognitive domain and elsewhere. Here, then, is an unfinished but urgent project for religious skeptics.

Can we reasonably trust religious skeptics to be sincerely open with regard to hearing God's perfectly authoritative voice? Suppose that I in particular have heard God's perfectly authoritative voice in a life-changing way that many morally and cognitively responsible people have. (We could name names here, but we won't digress.) Why, then, should I give cognitive priority to the (now questionable) doubts about God's reality from religious skeptics? Why should I trust that skeptics are better listeners than I am for God's voice, especially given that cognitive modesty is rare among religious skeptics (evidenced by the typically uncritical ways they – Hume (1780) and Russell (1953) are familiar textbook examples – wield their own skeptical cognitive standards and demands)? At a minimum, skeptics must give us good reason to believe that their listening for God's perfectly authoritative voice is at least as reliable as the listening of careful nonskeptics. Even prior to that, they must give us good reason to believe that they are genuinely willing to listen for God's authoritative voice, despite their skeptical tendencies. As for myself, I remain doubtful on both fronts, at least until the needed evidence is in. Skeptical doubts themselves remain distinctively questionable in this connection.

The authoritative voice of an all-loving God would manifest the power of perfect self-giving love, the kind of love demonstrated by the redemptive, self-giving cross of Jesus. This voice would call people to turn from their selfish ways through obedient fellowship with the unselfish, all-loving God. Apprehending the power of God's voice accurately would be to

apprehend it *as the authoritative voice of God*, which requires apprehending it as normatively supreme over other voices and wills, including over my own voice and will. So, apprehending God's voice accurately would require my apprehending that I *should* (be willing to) yield to God's voice. If, however, I would be unwilling to yield to God's voice after having apprehended God's voice accurately, I would be left with a serious cognitive-volitional disconnect. I would then apprehend correctly that I should yield to God's authoritative voice but remain unwilling to yield. My will would then be out of line with what I have apprehended correctly regarding God's authoritative will, namely, that it is normatively supreme. In that case, I may very well try to sidestep the disconnect by denying that I have actually apprehended God's voice. I would then purchase cognitive-volitional coherence at the expense of what I have actually apprehended. A skeptic in such a position would not be a reliable guide to matters concerning the reality of God's voice. My own evidence indicates that many skeptics are in exactly that position. (Again, we could name names, but we won't digress.)

Someone might propose that acknowledging God's voice as normatively supreme is itself an act of yielding one's will to God. This might seem to minimize the danger of the aforementioned cognitive-volitional disconnect. The problem, however, is that yielding one's will to God is *not* entailed by one's merely acknowledging God (or, God's voice) as normatively supreme. *Acknowledging* something regarding God does not entail, and so is not the same as, *yielding (one's will) to God* as a personal agent. So, the aforementioned cognitive-volitional disconnect is a real threat for skeptics unwilling to yield to God. An all-loving God would rightly avoid trivializing divine revelation in the presence of skeptics unwilling to yield to God's will.

This fits with the injunction of the Sermon on the Mount not to cast pearls before swine, that is, not to treat divine revelation as if it were dispensable rather than sacred.

Nobody would gain, not even skeptics, if evidence of divine reality were readily at our disposal, to be used on *our* preferred terms, as if God should pander to us cognitively. An all-loving God would not be cognitively promiscuous, and for this we should be grateful. Given a divine choice to redeem humans, God would have the redemptive aim to transform our selfish wills. This aim would inform the character of divine revelation for our own good, and in divine revelation cognitive promiscuity would be out. God's redemptive aim would supply what we truly *need*, however much we resist it or don't want it. Indeed, it would seek to break down our selfish willfulness even in the cognitive domain, where we set up cognitive standards to serve our own purposes and thereby block any divine purposes. For our own good, divine revelation would come through perfect authoritative evidence for the sake of volitional knowledge of God as perfectly authoritative Lord. The stretching of our cognitive comfort zone would thus be automatic.

Proper reception of authoritative evidence from God would avoid the aforementioned cognitive-volitional disconnect. In that case, God's will (toward unselfish love) would become mine too as I yield my will to God in volitional knowledge of God as authoritative Lord. Until religious skeptics have dealt carefully and honestly with the option of perfect authoritative evidence that goes beyond spectator evidence, we should be altogether skeptical about their religious skepticism. We should doubt that they are in a suitable position to report on the reality of God or on evidence of the reality of God. They would remain in a position akin to that of the

willful child who refuses to open his eyes to apprehend the challenging evidence around him.

Clearly, “out of mind” does not entail “out of reality.”

Religious skeptics typically fail to acknowledge the kind of cognitive difference that we should expect between God (if God exists) and ourselves (if we exist). In particular, they typically assume that since we humans are content with spectator evidence as a basis for ordinary knowledge, God would be too, even regarding knowledge of God. Skeptics thereby neglect cognitively important features of a perfect divine character, such as the fact that any redemptive God would seek, with perfect authority, to transform selfish human wills into unselfish wills, without pretending that humans are but innocent spectators. To the extent that this is neglected by skeptics, they neglect the central place of perfect authoritative evidence and volitional knowledge regarding divine reality. Traditional philosophy, including traditional religious skepticism, is marked by this serious neglect. In identifying this cognitive blind spot, we may hope that it soon disappears.

Skeptics will likely object as follows. If I, for instance, am willing to submit to God, as volitional knowledge requires, then I may very well be biased in favor of theism in a way that taints me cognitively. I cannot then be trusted as a reliable listener for God’s voice, because I am then listening in a way that makes me readily *creative* rather than just receptive. This line of objection, however natural, is too quick. Willingness to submit to God does not entail willingness, or any other tendency, to fabricate evidence of God’s reality in the absence of such evidence. Consider a salient analogy. I may like the taste of bitter dark chocolate (say, with 85% cocoa), and willingly seek it in a candy bar, but this would not lead me to fabricate the taste if instead I tasted something else that I don’t like, such as sweet milk chocolate (say, with just 30%

cocoa). Skeptics would need to show that willingness to submit to God yields a tendency to fabricate evidence of divine reality in the absence of such evidence. This is a tall order indeed, and I see no reason to think it will be discharged. Religious frauds, incidentally, are typically the last people to be willing to submit to God. They characteristically put themselves first, and their god becomes a means to their own ends. (Once again, we'll have to forgo naming names; see, with due caution, the televangelists scheduled for Sunday morning.)

Some religious skeptics share Thomas Nagel's worry that the existence of God would pose a serious "cosmic authority problem" for us, and thus, like Nagel, they hope that God does not exist. Nagel claims: "I want atheism to be true.... I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that" (1997, p. 130). Behind this strikingly bold attitude, Nagel evidently misses the tragedy of the desired situation, the tragedy of a missed opportunity of a *lastingly* good life supported by an all-loving God. Something has gone wrong here, and some people don't even notice this. We face yet another blind spot.

It would be a strange, pathetic God indeed who did not pose a serious cosmic authority problem for us humans. It would be part of the status of being *God*, after all, that God has unique authority, or lordship, over us humans. Since we humans aren't God, the true God would have perfect authority over us and, if He chooses to redeem us, would thus seek to correct our profoundly selfish ways. Nagel confesses to having a fear of any religion involving God. Such fear seems widespread among humans, and seems to arise from human fear of losing our own supposed lordship over our lives. A philosopher might think of this as fear of losing "autonomy," whatever that slippery term connotes. Willful children are good at exhibiting such fear, and adults can be too. The fearful attitude is: "It's my way, or no way." This attitude runs deeper

than the reach of argument, since one can hold it consistently, and tragically. It needs a perfectly authoritative, corrective word from God. Still, the proponent of such an attitude may rebuff any such word, choosing death instead. Tragically, one can consistently choose death here. Opposing arguments may get no real foothold. Philosophers may wish otherwise, but the needed arguments are not automatically forthcoming.

At this point, I can go no further with religious skeptics, since I'm not God (no reminder needed here). Just as I can't control your voice, I can't control the voice of God either. God must ultimately provide the perfect authoritative evidence of God's reality, and that's a good thing. The big question now is: are skeptics willing to receive such evidence? Time alone will tell.

### *Conclusion*

We have found no easily generalizable support for religious skepticism about the reality of God. Even *if* an individual were to lack adequate evidence for God's reality, this individual would have no ready way to generalize to the truth of religious skepticism for people in general. Salient evidence of God's reality possessed by nonskeptics is not challenged at all by the fact that there is an individual (or even a group) lacking such evidence. Analogously, the fact that one person lacks a religious experience does not challenge the religious experience of others. In addition, we may now ask *why* an individual lacks evidence of God's reality. Specifically, we may ask whether that person is genuinely open to perfect authoritative evidence and volitional knowledge regarding divine reality. If the person is not, we should question whether the person is in a good cognitive position to recommend skepticism. If the person is open to perfect authoritative evidence, we should wait to see if his days as a religious skeptic are numbered. In either case,

religious skepticism poses no general or immediate threat. Proponents of rumors to the contrary now owe us a reasonable counter to perfect authoritative evidence. We are, in any case, no longer playing a spectator sport, as we are ourselves candidates for divine judgment. In the presence of the true God, all things become new, even in epistemology and philosophy.\*

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