

The Elusive God

Reorienting Religious Epistemology

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Doubting Skeptics

Many philosophers contend that any acknowledgment of a perfectly loving God who cares for people is just wishful thinking, and not sound judgment at all. Their skepticism about God's reality colors their whole conceived universe, even darkly as far as lasting hope for human life goes. Whether they *know* that we have mere wishful thinking in acknowledgment of God's reality remains to be seen. In any case, we need to face such skepticism head on. It has remarkable staying power among philosophers, whatever its standing regarding truth and available evidence.

In keeping with philosophical positions generally, skepticism comes in many different versions. Skeptics have doubted the reality of the external world, (other) minds, abstract objects, physical objects, history, the future, causation, God (of course), evil, goodness, and so on. In addition, skeptics have disavowed various cognitively important states: certainty, knowledge, justified belief, and reliable belief, among others. Skepticism also comes in different strengths of doubt. *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, but we won't delay with elaborate taxonomy. Instead, we'll turn directly to religious skepticism and its prospects regarding God's existence.

Religious skepticism, we'll see, is not as compelling from a cognitive point of view as many philosophers have supposed, and is in fact open to serious challenge. In particular, we'll see that we have no easily generalizable support for religious skepticism about the reality of God. Even if an individual person were to lack adequate available evidence for God's reality, this person would have no ready way to generalize to the truth of religious skepticism *for people in general*. This chapter reaches this conclusion after identifying what motivates influential religious skeptics and what confounds them.

1. SKEPTICISM

Religious skepticism is, unsurprisingly, skepticism about religion. What, however, is *religion*? The question appears simple enough, but this appearance is illusory, because the term “religion” is as unclear as any in the English language. When is something a religion, and when not? The answer is certainly not easy, and rarely comes with adequate precision. 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 coherently qualify as religion: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto, Bahaism, baseball, and knitting? They clearly lack a common goal or object. Perhaps, however, they sometimes share an underlying human *attitude*. That is, a distinctive kind of human *commitment* may be common to these diverse phenomena: namely, a *religious* commitment.

We now shift our slippery question. When is a human *commitment* religious, and when not? Whatever the answer, this shift redirects skepticism to consider a particular kind of human commitment. In doing so, the shift has religious skeptics 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 is intended to be life-defining (that is, intended to be constitutive of living) for that person. We can imagine a person for whom baseball or knitting is, however strangely and sadly, an object of religious commitment in this sense. (In reality, for what it’s worth, there are purchasable T-shirts in Chicago and elsewhere boldly proclaiming, “Baseball is Life”; see also Evans and Herzog 2002.) Religious skeptics, in this case, would express doubt about a religious commitment among humans. Their doubt could stem from this issue: 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, Moser 1993, chap. 4.) Taxonomy for value theory, however, isn’t our topic. Religious skepticism is our quarry, and thus we won’t digress. We’ll make do with just the distinctions we need for an adequate assessment of religious skepticism.

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; in that case, it would fail to capture reality as

indicated. We may say that it lacks “factual” goodness in that case. A religious commitment could also be *cognitively* bad by virtue of lacking the status of knowledge or of justified belief, owing perhaps to inadequate evidential support, even if it happens to turn out to be factual, that is, true. In addition, a religious commitment could be *morally* bad by virtue of bringing about moral harm, such as social injustice or individual selfishness and harm. (Imagine, for instance, hijacked commercial jet airliners, loaded with innocent passengers, flying into skyscrapers in New York City on September 11, 2001, allegedly for the vindictive cause of some viciously militant god; or, sadly, read about it in any major newspaper published the next day; cf. Juergensmeyer 2003.) Religious skepticism regarding *factual* goodness and *cognitive* goodness has dominated philosophical discussion, and such skepticism will occupy our attention in this chapter.

We may plausibly jettison *semantical* religious skepticism, the position that dismisses religious claims on the ground that they are semantically meaningless. Nothing credible 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 meaningless. On the most charitable diagnosis, a certain lack of imagination underlies semantical religious skepticism regarding prominent religious claims. Skeptics who reportedly can’t imagine, for instance, that the God of traditional monotheism exists need remedial work in the area of imagining circumstances. The real deficiency here lies with the semantical *skeptics*, not with the semantical status of monotheism. Sometimes this deficiency is accompanied by a dubious general approach to semantical meaning, such as Humean empiricism or positivist verificationism about meaning. In that case, semantical skeptics appear to be caught in both the frying pan and the fire, without any imagination of a line of escape. We are, in any case, well-advised to move on, to less desperate positions.

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, since people involved in modern society don’t usually doubt the reality of baseball or knitting. When they do doubt such reality, we are inclined to question their sanity or at least their sense of humor, if only because those “religions” allegedly offer so much to so many. Going to the extreme, ardent skeptics might introduce *global*, or *comprehensive*, doubt that bears on baseball, knitting, and everything else, but that would be a dramatic move well beyond religious skepticism. We won’t wander now into that far-flung region where anything whatever seems to go in the area of doubt (see this book’s Appendix and Moser 2004a for a challenge to global

skepticism). Our topic is much closer to home, where our decisions typically make important differences and even bear on our lives.

For our purposes now, a certain irrelevance characterizes skepticism about religious commitments that have no supernatural 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 such supernatural object. (This was evidently *not* the attitude of Confucius himself, for what it's worth, but that's beside the point at hand.) Suppose that a skeptic questioned the factuality of the objects of these Confucianists' religious commitment. This would amount to *moral* skepticism, and not skepticism about supernatural phenomena. 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 supernatural object: God. This focus includes doubt about *the reality* of God and doubt about *the positive cognitive, or epistemic, value* of affirmations of God's reality. If religious skeptics are correct, we shouldn't be confident about God's reality, at least from a cognitive point of view. We should, instead, withhold judgment. Is their skeptical advice credible, from a cognitive point of view?

2. DIVINE 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, but in reality the situation is not quite so fractured. Along with many other people, I use the term "God" as a supreme *title* that connotes an authoritatively and morally perfect being inherently worthy of worship – worship as wholehearted adoration, love, and trust. The holder of this title, as the Introduction noted, must be perfectly loving toward all people, even toward enemies, and, as perfectly authoritative, must be inherently worthy of an executive decision-making status regarding every relevant area. Plausible candidates seem few and far between, if there is any worthwhile candidate actually available.

As a title, the term "God" can be fully intelligible to us even if there is no titleholder, that is, even if God doesn't exist. This use of the term thus allows for the intelligibility of familiar skeptical questions and doubts about the existence of God, and it fits with some prominent understandings of monotheism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Let's continue, then, to 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 about God's existence, I shall typically talk of what God *would* do or be like, where this is short for *would if God actually exists*. We'll thus give skeptics a fair hearing, but still offer a serious challenge to their skepticism about God's reality.

True to their cause, skeptics about God's existence usually raise doubt that there is a titleholder for the supreme title "God." Their familiar allegation is that people lack *adequate evidence* (for cognitively reasonable belief) that God exists. This charge is, of course, cognitively bold if it concerns *all* people, given the wide scope of potentially relevant evidence for all people. The skeptical allegation is *cognitive* in that it concerns *evidence*, and the alleged lack of adequate evidence underlies skeptical doubt regarding *the reality* of God, that is, doubt that God exists. These skeptics assume that if we lack adequate evidence of the reality of God, then we should, from a cognitive point of view, doubt (that is, suspend judgment) that God exists. If we define "adequate evidence" broadly enough, this assumption among skeptics is true and even cognitively compelling. We won't join fideists, then, in opposing skeptics on this front, since fideism implausibly entails that theistic commitment need not rest for its cognitive status on supporting evidence. In any case, we have more difficult opponents than fideists to face.

Belief that God exists would be *evidentially* arbitrary and thus *cognitively* irrational in the absence of supporting evidence, even if it's *true* that God exists. Mere factuality, or truth, in a person's belief doesn't necessarily yield evidential merit for that belief; many claims are true but still altogether without supporting evidence. Lucky guesses, say at the racetrack or on Wall Street, supply good examples of truth without supporting evidence. The requirement of adequate evidence for cognitively rational belief is impeccable, if its notion of adequate evidence is suitably broad and free of unduly narrow empiricist, rationalist, and deductivist strictures. Since a concern about adequate evidence for theism drives and defines mainline religious skepticism, we'll attend to that concern. We won't be concerned, then, with the question whether theistic belief makes believers *feel better*. I, for one, am largely indifferent to that question, but even if theistic belief did make that difference in feeling, it could still lack a good evidential status and thus be cognitively deficient and unreasonable in that regard.

How should we understand the slippery demand for adequate evidence? Many skeptics set the standard very high. 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 English as a spoken language, I can supply the needed evidence *by speaking English*, loud and clear, in the person's presence. In addition, I can straightforwardly 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 such control over evidence, I can meet a skeptic's demand of cognitive reproducibility in that particular case. *Some* evidence thus meets the suggested standard.

Must evidence be under our control? Certainly not, contrary to what many religious skeptics uncritically assume. Much of the inferred original evidence in cosmology, astrophysics, and geology, among other natural sciences, is neither under our control nor reproducible by us. Even if we can supply helpful analogies regarding some inferred original scientific evidence, that evidence itself is directly available to us only "in principle." We can't control or reproduce, for instance, the inferred original evidence of the big bang origin of the universe that occurred many billions of years ago. We lack the sheer power to do so; the inferred original evidence is, literally, beyond our powers of actual reproduction, and we obviously can't change this. Still, given our best science in cosmology and astrophysics, the original evidence was part of reality and is available to us indirectly and inferentially.

If the relevant science is deemed unconvincing by a skeptic, we can make the suggested point from ordinary perceptual experience. For instance, if I whisper a secret to you in an ordinary situation, you have salient evidence from your experience of hearing my whisper. Even so, you can't thereby control or reproduce the original evidence, given the following considerations: you can't control my utterances; you have no recording of my whisper; and I refuse to repeat my whisper. The original evidence in your experience of hearing in this case is real indeed but definitely beyond your control. There's no big surprise here, since much of what impinges on us perceptually (including some sensory pressures and some perceptual distractions) is beyond our control.

We should reject without hesitation any requirement that genuine evidence must be under our control or reproducible by us. As a result, we should reject any skeptical argument that assumes the following: if evidence of God's reality isn't reproducible by us, then it isn't genuine evidence. Our receiving evidence can be independent of our being able to reproduce that evidence, and, on reflection, it's amazing that any reflective adult would think otherwise. Still, hasty generalization does its damage in this quarter, inspiring and reproducing many wayward religious skeptics. The best antidote comes, as suggested, from familiar cases where we have genuine evidence but that evidence is beyond our control.

In popular, and even unpopular, discussions of theism, some skeptics demand “proof” of God’s existence, even without clarification of what they mean by the ambiguous word “proof.” In these discussions, “proof” is a fighting word, pure and simple. Let’s define “proof,” for the sake of clarity, as a deductively valid argument with true premises. Must adequate evidence of God’s reality, sufficient for the justification condition for propositional knowledge, include such an argument? Certainly not.

Very little of the evidence for propositions we know includes deductively valid argument. Most of our empirical (including perceptual) knowledge, for instance, rests on evidence free of deductively valid arguments. Likewise, most of my knowledge about myself and about other people doesn’t 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, if real, is a personal agent, not an axiom, a theorem, or an argument; it would be a serious category mistake to suppose otherwise. In keeping with these plausible considerations, Michael J. Buckley observes:

... [deductive or inductive] inference [to God] simply cannot substitute for experience [of God]. One will not long believe in a personal God with whom there is no personal communication, and the most compelling evidence of a personal God must itself be personal. To attempt something else as foundation or as substitute, as has been done so often in an attempt to shore up the assertion of God, is to move into a process... of which the ultimate resolution must be atheism (2004, p. 138).

The history of philosophy of religion bears out this observation. In addition, we lack not only proof but also adequate evidence of any kind for thinking that adequate evidence of God’s existence must include deductive proof as just defined. Let’s not be hindered, then, by any skeptical demand for deductive proof of God’s existence. Instead, we’ll let the relevant *notion* of God guide the suitable cognitive parameters, including the kind of evidence to be reasonably expected if God is real. Otherwise, we would risk begging some important questions about God’s reality and evidence thereof, regardless of whether God actually exists.

Evidence available to a person, characterized broadly, is a *truth-indicator* available to that person. Evidence thus indicates, even if fallibly and non-deductively, that a proposition is true. Clearly, evidence can be misleading, with regard to what is actually true, as the history of scientific evidence amply illustrates. Truth-indicators, as just suggested, come in various forms. Some indicate a truth *deductively*; others indicate a truth *nondeductively*. In addition, some truth-indicators are *propositional* in virtue of expressing

a proposition; others are *nonpropositional*, such as those from perceptual experiences that don't depend on our categorization or judgment but just on suitably determinate attention-attraction. Some truth-indicators can be controlled and reproduced by us; others can't. In all cases, however, a truth-indicator indicates for a person, in some way or other, that an identifiable proposition is true. The phrase "for a person" captures that justification, unlike truth, is *perspectival* in being relative to one's evidential perspective consisting of one's truth-indicators. (For elaboration on the idea of a truth-indicator and its central role in an account of evidence and knowledge, see Moser 1989, 1993.)

We can portray a person's *actual* evidence, beyond *merely* available evidence, in terms of a truth-indicator that has intruded in that person's awareness, even if that truth-indicator is fallible and thus potentially misleading. (We thus do well to distinguish between a person's *actually acquired* evidence and evidence *merely available*, in a modal sense needing specification, to that person but not actually acquired by that person.) Of course, not all intrusions are bad; some are good, even cognitively good, and needed too if humans are to grasp reality aright. Some evidential intrusions come through sensory awareness; others come through merely reflective, or intellectual, awareness. Still others intervene in one's will, intruding in one's willing in certain ways.

An adequate account of evidence and knowledge will characterize the various kinds of truth-indicators that intrude in a person's awareness. In addition, such an account won't confuse the notion of evidence *acquired* and the notion of evidence *willingly received*. Some evidence can intrude in one's awareness without one's willingly receiving it; such evidence is involuntary, as it coercively attracts one's attention, at least momentarily. Even so, such evidence often doesn't constantly coerce one's attention, and when it doesn't, one can decide to attend to something else instead. We'll see that purposively available evidence of divine reality doesn't constantly coerce one's attention or coerce the direction of one's will, even if it attracts one's attention momentarily.

An inadequate approach to evidence and knowledge will risk epistemological dogmatism by excluding some intruding truth-indicators, perhaps owing to an excessive and thus misguided quest for simplicity in kinds of evidence. (Cavalier use of Ockham's razor has misled many a philosopher throughout history.) Both thoroughgoing empiricism and thoroughgoing rationalism about evidence fall prey to such epistemological inadequacy. A similar inadequacy marks the deductivist view that all intrusions by truth-indicators include deductively valid proof. Deduction has no monopoly on truth-indicators; in fact, an endless regress of needed truth-indicators threatens if we suppose otherwise (on which, see Moser 1989, chap. 2).

We should embrace a cognitive analogue to Aristotle's wise advice, in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book I, chap. 3), to look for precision in each class of things *just so far as the nature of the subject matter admits*. The analogue is that we should let our understanding of evidence, and thus of knowledge, be guided by the actual features of the truth-indicators that intrude in our awareness rather than by some dubious antecedent cognitive standard, such as deductivism, thoroughgoing rationalism, or thoroughgoing empiricism. In doing so, we'll characterize evidence in a manner true to the reality of our actual truth-indicators, even if, in keeping with fallibilism, some truth-indicators are ultimately misleading regarding reality.

Evidence of God's reality is, by definition, a truth-indicator for the proposition that an authoritatively and morally perfect agent worthy of worship actually exists. Where might we find such evidence? In nature? In history? In books? In ourselves? People have looked far and wide for evidence of God's reality, even in their valuable spare time, but religious skeptics remain unconvinced about claims to success. For instance, Bertrand Russell (1970) anticipated his response if he were to meet God after death: "God, you gave us insufficient evidence." Insufficient for *what*? For Russell's highly questionable expectations of God? In any case, Russell's charge against God sounds blaming, to put it mildly. Russell might have considered a bit more modesty in the presence of an authoritatively and morally perfect God. In that case, a humbled Russell, unlike the actual Russell, would have asked: "God, what purposes of yours led to your being subtle and elusive in the purposively available evidence of your reality?" It's astonishing, and regrettable too, that Russell as a self-avowed rational truth-seeker gave no indication of being aware of such a compelling and important question for a rational truth-seeker.

We now face a question widely but unduly neglected by skeptics about God's existence. If a perfectly loving God would choose to give humans evidence of God's reality, what parameters or defining features for the evidence would God observe? God as perfectly loving toward all people would seek to communicate with people if this was in their best interest, and thus God would offer in that case some kind of evidence of God's reality. The key cognitive issue is: exactly what *kind* of evidence? It seems safe to say that God as morally perfect wouldn't necessarily be bound by the kind of evidence *we humans* happen to prefer. Instead, we should expect to have to conform our cognitive expectations to *God's* preferred evidence. On reflection, we shouldn't be surprised by this cognitive order of priority, given divine supremacy and human inferiority.

Clearly, the evidence of God's reality would have to be suitable to God's character as morally perfect and worthy of worship. So, contrary to some

versions of fideism, we shouldn't hold that the claim that God exists is in principle beyond the threat of disconfirming evidence. If, for instance, we were to face a world of *nothing but* unrelenting pain and suffering, we would have significant evidence against God's reality. We would then have significant evidence against the reality of a God who truly cares for all humans, and we would have no positive indication of the reality of such a God. The actual world, though obviously deeply troubled, 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 triumphed. Consider, for instance, a volunteer rescue worker unselfishly and eagerly caring for an injured stranger. That's a silver lining indeed, if anything is. Consider also Mother Teresa and her friends reaching out to aid the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. That's another bright silver lining, among many others. We need to ask whether the available good in this world is of the right kind for the reality of a morally perfect God who has created free agents.

What would evidence suitable to God's character look like? In other words, what kind of evidence of God's reality would fit with the reality of a morally perfect God worthy of worship? Here's a vague answer: any kind of evidence indicating that God, as an authoritatively and morally perfect being worthy of worship, is real. Although true, this answer doesn't help much at all. Let's consider a more specific question: what kind of evidence of God's reality would be given to us by a morally perfect God worthy of worship who finds it in our best interest to receive evidence of God's reality? The answer depends on what God would intend to do with this troubled world, including us, and this would involve divine knowledge of how the world actually stands in relation to God. For instance, God would know whether this world has become altogether hopeless relative to what God desires of it.

God would have the cognitive and moral authority to reveal the things of God *in God's preferred ways*, in keeping, of course, with God's morally perfect character. We must beware, then, of uncritically demanding that evidence of God's reality must meet *our* preferred standards of evidence (in the way Russell did). Instead, as suggested, our evidential demands must be attentive to what would be a morally perfect God's character and corresponding 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. One result is that the view that conclusive evidence of divine reality *must* conform to a (nontrivial) deductive proof is misguided. An even more demanding view is that conclusive evidence of divine reality must be undeniably obvious, that is, obvious in a way that undeniably dominates one's attention. Both views are excessively demanding for the purposes of a perfectly loving God.

A perfectly loving God may offer a nondemonstrative and even nondominating, or rejectable, truth-indicator of divine reality, in order to allow people either (a) to know God's reality noninferentially or (b) to ignore or to reject freely God's intervention and any awareness of God. A "nondominating" truth-indicator may involve modest attention-coercion as a rejectable intrusion in one's attention, but it wouldn't involve strong attention-coercion as a dominating, nonrejectable takeover of one's attention. Given divine use of nondemonstrative and nondominating evidence, some familiar deductivist and skeptical demands regarding theistic evidence would be misguided. We need to be open, then, to God's offering rejectable noninferential evidence of divine reality. Otherwise, we'll be guilty, as are many religious skeptics, of harmfully misleading cognitive dogmatism regarding evidence of divine reality.

3. JUDGMENT

Let's move further away from theological abstractions to conceptual specificity, so as not to languish in cognitively sterile generalities about divine reality (an occupational hazard in academic, especially philosophical, discussions of "God"). The God of Jewish and Christian monotheism is widely and explicitly disavowed by religious skeptics, including many philosophers (see Martin 2007 for abundant examples and references). Even so, many Jews and Christians regard this God as worthy of worship and thus as morally perfect and inherently trustworthy. In the absence of a better candidate, we'll give some attention to the nature of this alleged God and the corresponding cognitive lessons about divine reality.

The God in question, we're told, seeks to redeem (that is, to reconcile to God) a world of people alienated from fellowship with their creator and thereby gripped by selfish fear, moral failure, and personal dying and death. The alienation of humans supposedly arises, at least in part, from their selfish willfulness, that is, their asserting their own wills in conflict with what is willed by a perfectly authoritative and loving God. Such selfish willfulness may stem from human fear of personal loss and destruction, in the absence of reliance on divine aid. In any case, all of human life is allegedly surrounded by this alienation and deeply infected by it too. We'll pursue this approach to divine and human reality, and ask whether it can answer and even challenge religious skeptics. We'll have to leave it as unfinished business to consider exactly how the God of Jewish and Christian monotheism relates to the versions of monotheism in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Bahaism, and other traditions. Clearly, there's no plausible story of full agreement or even full consistency to tell regarding their approaches to God. The relevant historical

and theological details, however, would demand extensive discussion, well beyond the scope of this book.

We won't simply assume, of course, that the God of Jewish and Christian monotheism exists. Fideism about commitment to God's existence, in disregarding a need for evidence of divine reality, gains nothing of stable value in an exchange with skeptics or in a quest for well-grounded truth regarding the reality of God. Instead, we'll ask what we should expect by way of evidence regarding the reality of a morally perfect God *if* this God exists. In addition, we'll examine whether the characteristic features of the alleged God of Jewish and Christian monotheism illuminate our understanding of a morally perfect God. We can then ask if our world and our experience fit well with our cognitive expectations suited to a morally perfect God. We'll then be able to tell where our overall evidence actually points. Skeptics about God, then, will receive a fair hearing, but it doesn't follow that all skeptics will be convinced. People typically can ignore or disregard available evidence, and sometimes will do so if the evidence challenges them to change the direction of their lives. There's a lot at stake regarding one's life, as we'll see, in one's sincerely affirming, denying, or withholding judgment that a perfectly loving God exists.

Cognitively discriminating religious skeptics are very rarely, if ever, seriously challenged by an evidential case for the attenuated God of deism or minimal theism. (Minimal theism, for our purposes, affirms that God exists but refrains from claims about God's redemptive purposes.) We'll move beyond consideration of deism and minimal theism, then, and look for the consequences for religious skepticism from the more robust Jewish and Christian monotheism. If we ignore robust Jewish and Christian monotheism, for the sake of deism or minimal theism, we'll fail to appreciate the bearing of robust theism on skepticism about God's existence. Settling for deism or minimal theism, philosophers often miss this opportunity, but we'll seize it here. At least we'll then apprehend what kind of robust theism is in question or, instead, what kind of robust theism is putting *us* as cognitive agents in question. Such a reversal regarding who is judging and has a right to judge is characteristic of robust Jewish and Christian monotheism. It removes any sophomoric easiness from skepticism about God's existence, and it fits with the seismic cognitive shift promised in the Introduction. For now, however, we are exploring a *notion* of God found in Jewish and Christian monotheism; we are not assuming the existence of this God. This conceptual exploration is fitting, because we need a notion of God even to deny God's existence or to withhold judgment, at least intentionally, about God's existence.

Humans generally seek their main security and contentment, as an alternative to fear of personal loss, from things other than God, typically from things in the world that seem to offer safety and satisfaction. This, of course, is a confirmable empirical truth. (See Kasser 2002 for empirical evidence on some of the unhappy consequences.) The familiar list of apparent sources of human security goes on and on: health, wealth, longevity, education, family, reputation, physical appearance, entertainment, selfish religion, sexuality, human friendship, self-protective plans, and so on. Anything other than the true God could take on the role of a supposedly satisfying idol for a person, and then leave the person unsatisfied and insecure. Honesty about the inadequacy of idols is difficult, however, in the absence of a stable replacement. Insecurity and despair then become a painful threat, and it can even seem easier to change the subject altogether.

In perfect love, God would place the world under judgment to try (perhaps among other things) to save people from dying with their idols, their ultimately insecure replacements for God. A perfectly loving God would try to lead people noncoercively (that is, in a manner that can be rejected, in terms of the direction of their will) not only to *recognize* the ultimate futility of the idols offered by the world apart from God, but also to *let go* of such idols in order to make proper room for God as authoritative Lord. This would be integral to any attempted divine redemption, or reconciliation, of humans to God, in volitional fellowship with God. It would also highlight that, contrary to various ancient and modern gnostic writers, humans need more than cognitive enlightenment for their lasting security or salvation. Apart from cognitive and intellectual matters, human *volitional reliance* on idols needs an antidote, even corrective judgment, in a world governed by God as authoritative Lord.

The theme of divine *judgment* is Christian as well as Jewish. For instance, the apostle Paul (a Christian Jew) 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 corruption and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom. 8:20–21; cf. Eccl. 1:2–11, 2:1–24). Many skeptics have raised doubts about God’s existence on the basis of the obvious reality of extensive pain and suffering in our world. They doubt that a perfectly loving God would allow the horrifying pain and suffering in this world, and thus they offer this world’s pain and suffering as supplying a defeater of any evidence for God’s existence. Matters are, however, more complex than this move suggests. We humans, of course, aren’t (and shouldn’t expect ourselves to be) in a position to explain why all the pain and all the suffering in this

world occur, or (if God exists) are allowed to occur. Our explanatory and cognitive resources are much too limited for this difficult explanatory task. Even so, we can consider that pain and suffering result, at least in part, from the way that creation has been “subjected to futility” for the sake of corrective divine judgment.

The created world, according to a prominent strand of Jewish and Christian monotheism, was subjected to breaking down by a perfectly loving God, as in the case of physical entropy or atrophy, *for a hopeful divine purpose*. The overarching purpose is, according to the divine hope in question, that all willing humans would learn that their lasting security and contentment won’t be found in any part of the created world apart from God. Karl Rahner (1983a) has called this “Christian pessimism” about the created world by itself (cf. Rahner 1978, pp. 403–5, Niebuhr 1949, pp. 151–70, Crowley 2005.) Lasting security and contentment need to be found elsewhere, and, according to the apostle Paul, “the children of God” will find it in *God* rather than in the created world apart from God. They will then be liberated from their deadly idols of insecure replacements for God found in this dying world. They will then have the personal life Preserver they need to overcome the human predicament of destructive selfishness, tragic suffering, and impending death. They will then trust (that is, have faith in) God above all else, rather than some inadequate, deadly alternative. We need to characterize the cognitive basis for such bold trust, because without such a basis the trust in question will risk becoming wishful thinking and thus cognitively irrational.

We can make some sense, in Paul’s wake, of why a perfectly loving God would allow certain kinds of pain and suffering. This God, as perfectly loving, would be after something more valuable than human sensory pleasure and the satisfaction of worldly human wants. God would hope that people be liberated from deadly idols in virtue of trusting God as the authoritative Lord who provides genuine human security and contentment, come what may in this world. This divine hope could thus 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 of human idols, by bringing them to noticeable futility, for the sake of reconciliation of humans to God in volitional fellowship with God. It would be judgment intended, at least characteristically, to correct humans from their reliance on futile idols and to restore them to their creator and sustainer in volitional fellowship.

Regarding divine redemption of humans from deadly idols, one maxim seems clear: *no pain, no gain*. A perfectly loving God, in any case, wouldn’t settle for maximizing sensory pleasure for wayward humans. Sensory hedonism wouldn’t capture or even approach the solution needed by selfish humans.

A serious, even painful, challenge may be better for us than quick and easy protection from our pain. Such a challenge may be integral to divine *perfect love* toward us that seeks to transform us to love as God loves, in volitional fellowship with God. A rough analogy: our intentionally prying a dangerous tool (say, a razor-blade knife) from the playful but clenched hands of a child for the child's well-being may bring some pain to the child but would nonetheless be good, wise, and loving. In fact, the child may later, upon reflection, thank us for such uncomfortable but obviously good and loving intervention. (On the kind of corrective judgment in question, see Meadors 2006 and Buttrick 1966.)

The prospect of divine redemptive judgment is *cognitively* important, although widely ignored in that regard. It bears importantly on the nature of purposively available evidence of God's reality, that is, evidence available to humans in a manner, and only in a manner, that serves God's perfectly loving purposes, including any redemptive purposes. The latter purposes would represent God's moral character, and seek noncoercively but authoritatively to align human purposes with divine purposes, for the sake of divine-human volitional fellowship. Given a perfectly loving creator, wayward humans, as part of creation, would be under divine judgment for their selfish, anti-God ways. So, we should expect that our coming to know God's reality, in virtue of our receiving purposively available evidence of divine reality, would have an important place for divine perfectly loving judgment of us and our selfish ways.

Politeness aside, we selfish humans are ourselves our most common destructive idol, even though we *obviously* can't supply lasting security and contentment for ourselves. We can't even supply lasting subsistence for ourselves, and our limitation here is painfully obvious, if anything is. A short visit to any funeral home, cemetery, or obituary section of a newspaper will confirm this truth in sad but compelling detail. Many humans thus prefer to change the subject altogether, to something more polite and affirming. Life then seems easier, or at least less painful.

A perfectly loving God would demand that we move beyond our selfishness to characteristically divine unselfish love toward all people, but we obviously fail repeatedly and persistently on this front. This is failure in what we may call *Love's Demand*. If unsuppressed, our conscience, as an inner source of moral conviction, convicts us of this failure, and we then experience guilt, shame, and judgment. Our self-centeredness leaves us with a troubled conscience, at least in the absence of our fully suppressing our conscience. We thereby may be challenged and judged, for the purpose of reorientation, by a divine standard of love represented in conscience. Reinhold Niebuhr has

remarked in this connection: “. . . it is a fact that man is judged [in conscience] and yet there is no vantage point in his own life, sufficiently transcendent, from which the judgment can take place” (1941, p. 129). Vantage points aside, moral honesty about ourselves requires that we acknowledge the *propriety* of judgment relative to Love’s Demand, regardless of our view of the judgment’s actuality or source. It requires candor from us about our violating Love’s Demand, even intentionally at times. Our self-defense runs thin in this connection.

Human moral pride boldly but mistakenly resists honesty about our flouting Love’s Demand. It offers a cover-up story instead, to try to salvage our moral honor, including our good civic standing. Our moral pride suggests, contrary to what is actually the case, that we have no need of moral guilt or shame, on the ground that we are morally in the clear on our own, even if morally imperfect. So, according to our moral pride, we aren’t deserving candidates for moral judgment. Instead, we merit moral approval, even from God, by the lights of our pride. Our moral pride thus opposes any place for judgment of us from Love’s Demand. In keeping with this, according to sociological surveys, most people think of themselves as morally better than most other people. Something, of course, is wrong with that moral self-portrait, and undue moral pride is the stubborn culprit.

Our moral pride emerges as a frayed paper-thin veneer in the presence of Love’s Demand. We violate Love’s Demand regularly, and we have salient available evidence for this, particularly regarding our treatment of socially neglected people, including the poor, the elderly, and the disabled. Any diversionary efforts on this front won’t change the available vast evidence for this at all, but will simply lead us deeper into the dishonesty of moral pride. Our most dangerous failures before a perfectly loving God who issues Love’s Demand would include a failure of moral honesty.

Our moral pride may stem largely from fear of judgment owing to moral failure and fear of not being in charge morally. Even so, dishonesty about our unloving ways is among our most harmful failures before Love’s Demand, because such dishonesty will lead us to resist, or at least to fail to see our need of, a perfectly loving God who issues Love’s Demand. It will obscure, at least in our own minds, how far we have departed from Love’s Demand and thus from any volitional agreement with its divine source. It will therefore also obscure not only our need of repentance relative to the standard of divine love, but also the suitability of any divine call to human repentance. A perfectly loving God who issues Love’s Demand and an authoritative call to human repentance couldn’t transform us noncoercively toward divine love as long as we cling to moral dishonesty about our unloving ways. We would

have to acknowledge our need for such transformation in order to yield to it freely, willingly, and gratefully.

In purposively redemptive love, a perfectly loving God would subject *us* to futility with regard to our aspirations and pretensions toward selfishness and self-reliance. This futility would include our impending physical death (facing *each* of us, despite energetic diversions), when we will meet our end in this tragic dying world. A perfectly loving God's hope, out of redemptive love, would be that we see the futility of our intended self-reliance and come to our senses, thereby turning to trust wholeheartedly in God as authoritative Lord. Conclusive purposively available evidence of God's reality would fit with such divine hope. We'll examine how and why, and see how epistemology and philosophy undergo dramatic change.

The notorious God of deism, the cosmic watchmaker on the lam, would perhaps settle for providing us with evidence that the God of deism exists. This God, however, would have no message of reconciliation in volitional fellowship and certainly no redemptive judgment for humans. Instead, this God would be content to have people acknowledge, on the basis of empirical evidence from creation, that a creator (probably) exists, or at least *did* exist at the time of creation. Who's to say that the God of deism hasn't died, whether recently or long ago? We may simply not have been on the guest list for funeral announcements, and deists evidently weren't either. A mere creator, in any case, gives no guarantee or even assurance of being a *lasting* creator. Deists rarely acknowledge this truth, but it's hard to challenge this truth on traditional deist assumptions.

The God of deism would be the classic underachiever in heaven. Having created with a blazing flourish, even with light and heat effects, this God would refuse to follow up in any direct way, despite the tragic predicament of a dying creation. Such behavior won't win any contest for unselfish caring for creation. Indeed, it won't even show in the local or state contest rankings, let alone national benchmarks, and friends of the environment should be especially disappointed. The God of deism is truly the absent, AWOL God, guilty of felony child abandonment. So far as that God goes, we weren't left with even a clue of safe haven in this cosmic debacle. Indeed, this God is no God at all, if we retain "God" as a title for one worthy of worship in virtue of self-sufficient authoritative and moral perfection. Moral indifference obviously robs one of perfect love and thus of moral perfection and deity. Deism suffers accordingly, despite its initial appearance of desirable religious inclusiveness.

The Jewish and Christian God wouldn't be identifiable with the God of deism. This God would, in redemptive love, intervene too much for the care-free purposes of the God of deism, and thus they wouldn't even be coworkers.

In addition, the Jewish and Christian God wouldn't be impressed at all with mere human belief, even mere reasonable human 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 and Christian monotheism exists: "Even the demons [God's archenemies] believe [that God is one reality], and shudder" (2:19). For the sake of reconciling humans to God, the Jewish and Christian God would seek a human response that goes beyond belief, and even knowledge, that God exists. The distinctive purposively available evidence offered by this God would contribute to that conciliatory redemptive goal. We'll see what such evidence and such a goal would include. Philosophers and religious skeptics typically miss this crucial lesson, but we'll give it full attention. Otherwise, we would fail to give robust monotheism a fair hearing, and it rarely does get a fair hearing from skeptics or from philosophers generally. In the interest of a fair hearing, we'll make things morally uncomfortable for ourselves. The result will be well worth the moral discomfort.

4. UNDER AUTHORITY

The Jewish and Christian God, perhaps unlike the casual God of deism, wouldn't approach us as people who fully welcome evidence of the reality of God that challenges and judges our selfish ways. This God, in addition, would know better than to pander to humans, and we should too. The evidence in question concerns a God who, out of unselfish love, would challenge our selfish, deadly ways. Contrary to much popular marketing, teaching, and preaching about God, we wouldn't start out as friends of this God. We rather would be at odds with this God, owing to our selfish attitudes, actions, and habits. The notion of "enemies" of God readily comes to mind, but this differs from a notion of "condemned" enemies.

We shouldn't confuse divine corrective judgment with merely destructive *condemnation*, since there's a big difference between the two, a difference between potential life and final death. The Jewish and Christian God, given any hope for humans, would come to us with redemptive judgment of us and our selfish ways, for our own good. So, this God shouldn't be expected to come to us with *spectator evidence*, that is, evidence pointing to some truth but *not* demanding that its recipients yield their wills to (the will of) the source of the evidence. This God would have no interest in playing such an intellectual game.

The God in question would come to us with *authoritative evidence* of divine reality, that is, evidence demanding that we yield our wills to (the will of)

the divine source of the evidence in question. Indeed, this God would come with *absolutely perfectly* authoritative evidence of divine reality: evidence demanding that we yield our wills to the *self-sufficiently 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 *absolutely perfectly* authoritative evidence; the source, being merely human, wouldn't be self-sufficiently perfect. (Hereafter our talk of perfectly authoritative evidence of divine reality will concern absolutely perfectly authoritative evidence.) The God in question, then, would be no friend of human cognitive voyeurism regarding divine reality, given the authoritative demand, based on human redemptive need, that we yield our wills to God's morally perfect will. So, this God would be at odds with familiar philosophical and skeptical approaches to evidence of God's existence that focus on spectator evidence. This God would recognize that merely human inquirers suffer *volitional* (will-related) as well as cognitive impediments and deficiencies, and thus need corrective authoritative evidence of divine reality. This theme very rarely gets attention from philosophers and theologians, but we'll correct this neglect straightaway.

For purposes of cognitively rational belief that God exists, skeptics and philosophers generally demand that God provide us with spectator evidence of divine reality. In doing so, they miss what would be the main redemptive and cognitive aim of the Jewish and Christian God. They overlook that, faced with our dying selfish world, the morally perfect titleholder of "God" would be (*if* God still has hope of redeeming humans) a God of intended redemption as reconciliation of humans to God. (On the significance of reconciliation to the God in question, see Farmer 1935, 1966, Martin 1981, Stuhlmacher 1986, and Chapter 3 below.) Such a God would come to us, not with spectator evidence, but rather with perfectly authoritative evidence of divine reality. Spectator evidence from God would allow God to be inculpably domesticated and taken for granted by us in our selfish ways, because it would lack corrective judgment toward us and our selfishness.

Given spectator evidence, the topic of divine reality would readily become a matter for casual, speculative discussion, and thereby would be trivialized with regard to God's authoritative character. In that case, we might hear familiar echoes of traditional natural theology, with its endless haggling over alleged spectator evidence of attenuated first causes, intelligent designers, and the like. In neglecting a divine authoritative call to humans, spectator evidence of God's existence would thus risk serious harm to us and fail as a means of genuine redemption. It would enable undue comfort in our destructive ways, allowing us to suppose that we are prepared on our own

to face cognitive matters of divine reality. Spectator evidence, in keeping with traditional natural theology, would fail to challenge humans in the ways needed, particularly regarding the inadequacy of human moral and cognitive standing before a perfectly authoritative and loving God.

Some philosophers and theologians seek to recruit the apostle Paul as a proponent of natural theology and spectator evidence, in light of his remarks in Rom. 1:19–20. Careful attention to his remarks, however, reveals that (a) he does *not* propose that nature *alone* reveals divine reality, but that (b) he explicitly claims that “God has manifested” divine reality to people. Given an intention to redeem us, a perfectly loving God would be a God of perfectly authoritative evidence for humans. So, this God would have a definite purpose different from our casually knowing that God exists: the purpose of bringing humans into lasting reconciliation with God, in loving and obedient fellowship with God. We should thus expect the titleholder of “God” to offer purposively available evidence of God’s reality (if divine hope for human redemption remains) that advances this redemptive purpose. Divine redemption, we’ve suggested, need not be comfortable for us in order to be good for us. On the contrary, we should expect it to challenge our morally dubious comforts as long as we’re selfish in any way. If we suffer from selfishness, we’ll be inclined to be selfish in protecting our selfishness. We thus should be prepared to be discomfited by anyone challenging our selfishness. A perfectly loving God, then, would bring needed correctively good discomfort in order to bring good comfort. We might thus look for a rough analogy in a benevolent surgeon who brings discomfort to a person in order to bring something good to that person.

A central problem of divine redemption would be that we need to be saved from ourselves in our selfishness, because we ourselves would be at odds with God’s perfectly loving character and redemptive plan. We would need to be saved from (a) our deadly quest for self-reliance into (b) obedient trust (on God’s terms) in the God who could save us from our destructive selfishness and impending death. (Chapter 5 will return to the latter twofold predicament.) Unlike spectator evidence, perfectly authoritative evidence of divine reality would attend to resolving this predicament by seeking human volitional transformation toward divine perfect love.

Opposing selfish human pride, authoritative divine evidence would work by *cognitive grace*, a free, unmerited gift from God, rather than by any human earning that supposedly obligated God to redeem a person or to give divine self-revelation to a person. Such divine evidence would counter our supposed powers of intellectual earning in order to deflate intellectual pride, and would thus demonstrate our weakness, including our self-*inadequacy*,

regarding finding the true God on our own. The God of perfectly authoritative evidence would therefore not fit well with the docile gods of the philosophers and natural theologians. The latter gods offer no authoritative challenge to our being pridefully puffed up in our supposed special knowledge or argumentation regarding divine reality; nor do they call us into divine-human fellowship via human repentance. Authoritative evidence from an authoritative perfectly loving God, in contrast, would build up rather than puff up humans. (Chapters 2 and 3 will return to the widely neglected theme of cognitive grace.)

We have no conclusive evidence for thinking that *by our own resources* we can reason our way to, or otherwise achieve, knowledge of the reality of the Jewish and Christian God. At least, I know of no such evidence, and the alleged evidence from traditional natural theology falls short of conclusive evidence for the reality of a perfectly authoritative and loving God of redemption. Instead, we evidently need a *self-revelation* from God as the source of the needed conclusive evidence of divine reality. A God who is worthy of worship and thus morally perfect would, of course, be significantly different from us humans in terms of moral character and cognitive subtlety and depth. In addition, it's doubtful that such a God would be at our convenient cognitive disposal, as if we either had the authority or were well-positioned on our own to gain access to this God. Otherwise, we would be left with a God whose authority could be overridden or at least compromised by humans.

We should contrast (a) the attempt to reason our way to, or otherwise achieve, knowledge of God's reality by our own resources and (b) our need to receive purposively available conclusive evidence as a gift from a perfectly loving God who calls us to live as God's dependent obedient children, even in the cognitive domain. The relevant divine call, I've suggested, would itself be a manifestation of divine love; in experiencing it in one's conscience for what it is intended to be, one would experience divine love. This approach is foreign to how philosophers, including skeptics, typically think of evidence, but this doesn't count against it at all. It identifies a kind of experienced theistic evidence that would be cognitively more basic than any argument for God's reality. We'll see that this approach yields a new challenge to skeptics about God's reality.

Ultimately, humans would need to depend on God to supply conclusive evidence of divine reality via self-revelation, and God, of course, wouldn't expect humans to be cognitively in charge of the nature of divine revelation for humans. God alone would be absolutely perfectly authoritative and thus have the prerogative to decide, in keeping with God's morally perfect character, what exactly the divine revelatory evidence would be for humans and

when it should emerge. This fact alone should keep humans cognitively modest regarding divine revelatory evidence, but it rarely has, especially among philosophers and skeptics.

According to many first-century Jewish Christians, God chose to supply perfectly authoritative evidence of divine reality through Jesus of Nazareth as God's perfectly obedient Son. This evidence, according to these Christians, was ratified by God's intervening Spirit, the "holy [that is, distinctively righteous] Spirit" of God. We'll consider this cognitive approach, because it purports to identify the evidential ways of a perfectly authoritative and loving God. In addition, we would gain nothing by pretending that this approach doesn't exist or by brushing it aside as a lost cognitive cause from the start. We need, instead, to determine what kind of cognitive status it actually has. (Chapter 3 will return to the cognitive role of God's intervening Spirit in detail.)

Steeped in epistemological concerns, the Gospel of John portrays Jesus as characterizing the cognitive and moral role of God's intervening Spirit as follows:

When [the Spirit] comes, he will convict the world of guilt regarding sin, righteousness, and judgment . . . [w]hen . . . the Spirit of truth comes, he will lead you into all truth. He will not speak on his own, but will speak only what he hears, and he will announce to you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me, because he will take from me and announce this to you (Jn. 16:8, 13–14).

God's intervening Spirit, according to this first-century portrait, has the cognitive role of making things known regarding God and Jesus. Jesus emerges as God's unique revealer who calls humans (a) to receive God's Spirit of redemption through trust (that is, faith) in God, in response to God's call, and (b) thereby to live as God's dependent obedient children in fellowship with God. This theme captures what Jesus sought to manifest, according to the New Testament Gospels, and it has, as we'll see, distinctive cognitive implications. In any case, we've entered strange cognitive territory, where the true God may lurk incognito. We'll do well to linger here a bit, in order to examine the peculiar evidential situation.

God's intervening Spirit, on the portrait under review, would noncoercively (that is, in a rejectable manner) "lead" people to Jesus and his Father as their Lord and their God, and the experience of "being led" in this way would be cognitively significant. It would include the perfectly authoritative divine call, via human conscience, to relinquish our own selfish willfulness for the sake of living for the unselfish perfectly loving will of God. This elusive

wake-up call would aim to work, if painfully, through human conscience in order to reach us at our internal moral center, where one could “know reality together” with God, as the etymology of “conscience” suggests. It wouldn’t be reducible to spectator evidence, but would come instead with a moral challenge to us to be awakened from our selfishness to the moral primacy of divine love, even if we dislike and dismiss the challenge. We would, in any case, be accountable to God for how we respond to such a life-or-death challenge to be transformed toward God’s character. Our lives would show how we respond, even if we change the subject to something less challenging and more selfish. (On the central role of conscience in a call from a perfectly loving God, see Forsyth 1913, Hallesby 1933, Rahner 1983b, and Grave 1989; for a misguided approach, influenced by Luther on the bondage of the human will, that eclipses the crucial role of the human will in suppressing or enabling conscience, see Thielicke 1966, pp. 298–331.)

Our failure to apprehend God’s authoritative call saliently may result from *our preferring not* to apprehend it on God’s terms of unselfish love for all people. We often prefer, for instance, *not* to have to forgive or to love our enemies, and we act accordingly toward our enemies. For decisive confirmation of this preference, we may check any daily newspaper or ask any honest observer of human interactions. It *seems* easier, or at least more in our own interest, to suppress or to ignore any call from God for us to live as dependent obedient children of God who reflect, if imperfectly, perfect divine love. God’s authoritative call toward perfect love would be anything but comfortable, given our selfish ways, particularly if we resolve to obey, come what may. This fits with the fact that genuine goodness doesn’t guarantee convenient comfort, and we do well not to confuse the two. As I suggested, we won’t let selfish comfort, at least for current purposes, drive our moral and cognitive deliberations about divine reality.

In our skeptical moments, we may ask: God, are You there at all? Are You truly *with us* at all? If so, why must You be so very elusive, often to the extent that You seem nonexistent? Instead, in redemptive love, God would ask us: Are you truly *with Me*, in your *will* as well as in your thought? If we aren’t, spectator evidence of God’s reality would only domesticate or otherwise devalue God’s authoritative reality, because it wouldn’t challenge us to submit to God as the Lord of our lives. The providing of such spectator evidence would be akin to what Jesus bluntly called “casting pearls before swine.” Harm would be done, because God would be recast as a cognitive idol for us, specifically as an object of cognitive voyeurism, apparently to be used by us as *we wish*. We have enough such harmful idols, and a perfectly authoritative and loving God wouldn’t be one of them. As a result, God would

elude our demeaning and domesticating ways, for our own good, even in the cognitive domain. Any resulting discomfort for us would also be for our good.

For the sake of upholding redemptive love toward humans, God wouldn't trivialize knowledge of God's reality by offering spectator evidence, as if knowing God's reality were an optional spectator sport. A perfectly loving God wouldn't be after mere spectators or even mere speculators, including mere philosophers. As a result, in redemptive judgment, God would hide God's ways from those who are "wise and intelligent" on their own terms in a way that devalues God's cognitive authority and supremacy (cf. Matt. 11:25–27, 1 Cor. 1:19–21). Given people who aren't ready, owing to whatever deficiency, for authoritative divine self-revelation of perfect love, God would hide on occasion from those people to avoid their harmfully trivializing divine self-revelation. Clearly, God wouldn't be obligated to give divine self-revelation to prideful supposed cognitive superiors who are resolutely and irredeemably opposed to God's ways. Even so, a perfectly loving God would work noncoercively to undo such opposition as long as there's hope for human redemption.

Perfectly authoritative evidence of divine reality, as noted above, would demand that we yield our wills to the perfect source of the evidence in question, namely, God. Such demanding would include an authoritative but noncoercive (that is, rejectable) *call* to us to yield to God's will in fellowship with God. It would require a personal source, an intentional agent, who has a will and a purpose to promote morally perfect love for and among all people. More specifically, a central purpose would be to have us freely yield to God's life-giving perfectly loving will as opposed to our own selfish wills. So, nonpersonal evidence, such as that from pomegranates, clouds, mountains, and cellular complexity, can't be perfectly (or even imperfectly) authoritative evidence; it lacks the needed will and call from a personal agent.

The kinds of "evidence" proposed in traditional first-cause, design, and ontological arguments for God's existence are logically independent of a personal authoritative call (for example, to divine–human fellowship) and thus aren't authoritative evidence. They lack an authoritative demand, or call, to us to yield our selfishness to the unselfish will of a perfectly loving God for the sake of divine–human fellowship. They thus offer at best spectator evidence, and leave us with no fitting challenge from the authoritative will of a perfectly loving God. This is not the kind of purposively available evidence a perfectly loving God of redemption would give to humans, because this is extraneous to what would be God's redemptive purpose to reconcile wayward humans to God.

Spectator evidence in its various manifestations would allow people to persist without challenge in their selfish anti-God ways, and thus would seriously misrepresent the character and reality of a perfectly authoritative and loving God. So, as promised, we won't be distracted by such proposed evidence that is at best incidental to the question of God's existence. We do well instead to move on to purposively available authoritative evidence that promises to settle our urgent questions about divine reality in relation to our dire human predicament. Traditional natural theology and philosophy of religion have simply neglected such authoritative evidence for divine reality, for the sake of more comfortable, less challenging spectator evidence. As a result, skeptics about God's existence haven't been adequately challenged by the relevant evidence. We are now in the process of correcting this deficiency.

A central challenge for us from a perfectly loving God would be an authoritative call to *repent* and to *obey faithfully and wholeheartedly*: that is, to turn our wills, with divine aid, to fully obedient submission to God's unselfish, perfectly loving will that offers a lasting life of fellowship 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 beings dependent on a perfectly loving God. In that case, we *should* renounce our pretensions to be in charge of our lives, but mere knowledge *that God exists* wouldn't make such renunciation automatic. My knowing that something is so, here as elsewhere, doesn't entail my yielding my will to another will. So, a perfectly loving God wouldn't aim or settle for *mere* human knowing that God exists. God would seek to have humans know that God exists, on God's terms and at God's time, but this knowledge would be a divinely intended component of a more robust divine end: fellowship in morally perfect love between God and humans. Such fellowship would emerge, if it emerges at all, from perfectly authoritative evidence from God, whereby God authoritatively calls people into divine-human fellowship.

Spectator evidence, as we've noted, omits any authoritative call from God for humans to enter into fellowship with God via human repentance and obedience. We can entertain spectator evidence without considering who *we* as responsible agents would be before a perfectly authoritative and loving God, that is, people under God's redemptive judgment that seeks to reconcile people to God via repentance and obedience. Spectator evidence omits a divine call to us to repent of our selfishness for the sake of submitting to God's perfectly authoritative and loving will. It thus easily allows us to ignore what would be a perfectly loving God's main purpose for us: to be made new by the power of God's will as we die to our selfishness and live in fellowship with God as God's dependent obedient children. Spectator evidence easily allows us to

treat God as just another undisturbing object of our casual reflection and speculation. It thus allows us easily to ignore a God of redemptive judgment who seeks reconciliation of humans to God. It replaces such a God with a deadly idol, typically a reflection of ourselves, even if supercharged. Our self-discovered spectator-oriented gods end up looking a lot like us, at least in terms of their demands on us. Since they aren't worthy of worship, given their lack of authoritative and moral perfection, they are unworthy of the title "God."

Exactly *how* would God call humans to repent and obey? This question is dangerous if it assumes that we are in a position to explain *exactly* how God would proceed with divine 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 and Christian monotheism has been that we definitely aren't in such a position (see, for example, Job 38–40, Jn. 3:5–8, 1 Cor. 2:6–16). God's ways of self-revelation, according to such theism, often leave us without an exact explanation of how the self-revelation arose or even why it arose as it did. On reflection, this is not surprising at all, and it's amazing that any duly reflective person would think otherwise.

A perfectly loving God would be committed to *self-revelation* to humans (as long as there's hope for reconciliation of humans to God) but not thereby to revealing to humans an *exact explanation* of how the self-revelation arose. Divine self-revelation doesn't require the latter; receiving such revelation can be innocent of explaining its origin exactly. A perfectly authoritative and loving God could call us to repent and obey, for instance, but leave us in the explanatory dark regarding exactly how God does this. 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 aren't 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 impinging on us in conscience; or, at least we should be, if we have become inclined to suppress our conscience. Some of these demands go against our own preferences, including our selfish preferences. They don't arise uniformly from our individual wills or even from the common will of our peer group. We see a clear example of this in the case of a lone moral reformer who, having had his or her own will morally corrected via conscience, speaks against societal racism or some other widespread injustice. Some of the ancient Jewish prophets, including Jesus, evidently fall into this

category. Some of our own peers apparently do too; Mother Teresa of Calcutta readily comes to mind. The moral demands found in conscience can serve as ways for God's will to challenge and to redirect us noncoercively, if we are suitably receptive. One must use discernment, of course, toward the various demands of conscience, since one's conscience can become corrupted and confused. Still, the presence of bad input doesn't preclude the presence of good input. It would be obviously unreasonable, even logically fallacious, to suppose otherwise.

Divine use of perfectly authoritative purposively available evidence, as opposed to spectator evidence, can account for God's appearing at times to be cognitively subtle, elusive, incognito, or hidden. (Chapter 2 will consider the relevance of divine hiddenness to atheism; cf. Moser 2004b.) When we disregard perfectly authoritative evidence of divine reality, perhaps for the sake of more convenient spectator evidence, we close ourselves off from what would be purposively available 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 focus on visual contours would block much salient visual evidence from reaching us. In excluding perfectly authoritative evidence, we would risk harm to ourselves, because we would exclude any available conclusive evidence of a life-giving reconciling relationship offered to us by God. To the extent that we block perfectly authoritative evidence of divine reality, we would block any salient evidence of God's existence.

Is, then, the key cognitive shortcoming with *religious skeptics* rather than with God? Religious skeptics rarely, if ever, consider this question seriously; nor do philosophers of religion in general. This deficiency typically stems from inadequate *cognitive modesty* regarding the matter of evidence of God's existence. Appropriate cognitive modesty requires that we be open to what would be a perfectly loving God's self-revelation *on God's terms*, even if God's terms take us beyond comfortable spectator evidence to perfectly authoritative evidence. In short, humans should be open to God's having cognitive authority regarding divine self-revelation. We'll turn, with this in mind, to a direct challenge to skeptics about God's reality. This challenge will enable us, in good conscience, to develop the promised cognitive shift in knowledge of God's reality.

5. VOLITIONAL KNOWING

Famously and fittingly, skeptics about God's reality demand *adequate evidence* of God's reality. We have agreed with this general demand, on the ground that, otherwise, commitment to God's reality would be cognitively

loose, promiscuous, and even arbitrary, at least from the perspective of the person having the commitment. We have suggested, however, that a human demand for casual, spectator evidence of God's reality conflicts with what would be God's perfectly loving character and purposes, particularly divine love's authoritative call for divine-human fellowship, including redemptive judgment on human selfishness and presumed self-sufficiency, even in the cognitive domain. Instead, we have proposed that a perfectly loving God would present a distinctive kind of purposively available *authoritative evidence* that challenges the selfishness of human wills for the sake of reconciling humans to God in divine-human fellowship. We'll see how such evidence leads to a powerful new challenge to skeptics about God's reality, given that skeptics, like others, would have to face the discomfort of divine redemptive judgment even in the area of human knowledge of divine reality.

Spectator evidence, as suggested, is *volitionally casual* in that it doesn't demand that we yield our wills to the source of such evidence. In this regard, it readily permits volitional looseness and even volitional promiscuity. Spectator evidence of God's reality would thus allow for volitionally casual access to God, with no demand on our wills relative to God's will to call us to repentance and divine-human fellowship. It would thereby neglect God's exalted status as perfectly and thus supremely authoritative for us in terms of the direction of our wills. A God without that exalted status would be no God at all, lacking the needed moral and volitional authority for the preeminent position of being worthy of worship. We do well, then, to refrain from the uncritical assumption that evidence of God's reality would be pretty much the same kind of thing as typical evidence for the reality of either numbers, quarks, or physical objects. This dubious assumption guides many skeptics about God's reality, as we'll see in what follows.

Why would the human will matter at all in our receiving some conclusive evidence of God's reality? Isn't the underlying assumption itself suspect, because God could simply coerce our attention to make us notice divine activities of various sorts, even against our resolute will to the contrary, and thereby give us any needed evidence of divine reality? This would be akin to the way that a noisy fireworks display can coercively grip one's attention for a while, even if one would prefer otherwise. Wouldn't a perfectly loving God similarly coerce our attention with divine fireworks or other interventions in order to remove any reasonable doubt about God's existence, even while leaving our *will* free to disobey God's call? In addition, given the absence of such coerced attention, doesn't this settle the evidential question about divine reality in favor of skepticism or even atheism?

The answers to the previous questions are found in what would be a perfectly authoritative and loving God's character and redemptive purpose, if

such a God were (still) to have hope for human redemption. (We shouldn't assume, of course, that God would be morally required to redeem, or even to try forever to redeem, people who resolutely and ultimately oppose being redeemed by God.) God's redemptive purpose, given divine hope for human redemption as reconciliation to God, would include our *volitionally knowing God as perfectly authoritative Lord*: that is, knowing God as Lord in such a way that we submit, if imperfectly, to God as the One whose will is perfectly and thus supremely authoritative. Such volitional knowing wouldn't allow us to approach God as a self-serving idol made in our own image or even as just another controllable object for our convenience or casual reflection. Instead, as volitionally conciliatory knowledge, it would include our submission to God as perfectly authoritative even over our own wills. It would thus launch a profound makeover of anyone who volitionally knows God.

A perfectly loving God, in seeking divine-human reconciliation, wouldn't pursue either human knowledge of God's reality as knowledge of "something we know not what" or, for that matter, any human knowledge of God's reality apart from volitional knowledge of God as authoritative Lord. All such volitional knowledge would include obedience to a divine call to human volitional submission to God as Lord, but in reality human submission could come in varying degrees or not at all. Some people, as the Introduction noted, could receive God's call, even for what it is intended to be, but disobey altogether what it demands; they would refuse to submit to God as Lord, despite their acknowledging the reality of God's call. Even so, a perfectly loving God would noncoercively seek perfectly loving human submission to the degree that God's moral character is perfectly represented in willing humans.

The divine call would avoid coerced human submission, given a divine aim for a freely entered, genuinely interactive relationship whereby humans are willingly transformed, perhaps over time, toward God's perfectly loving character. Coercion as an alternative to this aim would depersonalize the person being coerced, and thereby preclude a genuinely interactive relationship. So, a divine fireworks display that coerced our attention and volitional submission wouldn't accomplish God's redemptive purpose. God would, of course, have the sheer power to coerce human attention and volitional submission, but the pursuit of genuinely interactive love between God and humans wouldn't be achieved by such coercion.

God's coercing human attention in a manner analogous to a dominating fireworks display wouldn't necessarily even *contribute* to God's redemptive purpose. It may actually repulse a person, perhaps in the way that coerced familiarity can easily breed contempt, owing to its felt dominating of one's attention. Divine (noncoercive) eliciting of the free yielding of a human will may begin with a rejectable divine intrusion in human attention, but such

“modest coercion” of attention wouldn’t either preclude human rejection of the intrusion or yield by itself volitional submission to God. It would be significantly different, then, from a strongly coercive, dominating fireworks display that can’t be avoided or turned away. Even so, there could be occasions where a perfectly loving God could contribute to divine redemptive purposes by means of striking manifestations of divine power that grip one’s attention without becoming strongly coercive in the sense indicated.

As long as I would refuse to acknowledge God’s will as perfectly and supremely authoritative for humans, I would refuse to acknowledge God *as God*, where “God” is the pre-eminent title as characterized above. In addition, as long as I would refuse to submit to God as the One whose will is perfectly and supremely authoritative, I would thereby block myself from volitionally knowing God as perfectly authoritative Lord. This would interfere with any divine redemptive purpose of reconciling people, including me, to God. It would also interfere with my receiving available evidence of divine reality dependent on one’s yielding to that purpose. So, what I do with my will can be cognitively as well as redemptively significant. Beliefs obviously matter in what one knows and doesn’t know, because knowledge entails belief. One’s will matters too, especially in the case of receiving purposefully available evidence and knowledge of a perfectly loving God who has a redemptive purpose of reconciling humans volitionally to God.

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.” This was no casual concession to God. On the contrary, Jesus was conceding to God, for the sake of divine redemptive purposes, his upcoming tortuous death by Roman crucifixion. He was yielding his will, even his very life, wholeheartedly to God as One whose divine will is perfectly and thus supremely authoritative. Such yielding of one’s will to God doesn’t entail extinguishing one’s will altogether, or being left without a will at all. It is rather a matter of conforming one’s will to God’s will, or at least allowing one’s will to be conformed to God’s will. The underlying idea is that volitional fellowship, and thus reconciliation, with God requires the yielding of one’s will to God’s perfectly authoritative will. Agreement of our ideas or beliefs with God’s ideas or beliefs would fall short of such fellowship and reconciliation. Accordingly, a perfectly loving God wouldn’t be satisfied with agreement of our beliefs with God’s. Our *volitional agency* too would need to be brought in line with God’s perfectly loving purposes for the sake of genuine divine–human personal reconciliation.

If we construe volitional knowledge of God’s reality on the Gethsemane model, we are left with volitional knowledge *sub specie crucis*, that is, human

knowledge of God's reality from the volitional perspective of the cross of the obedient Jesus. This is volitionally knowing God as Lord that requires human will-yielding to God of the sort exemplified by Jesus on his way, obediently, to crucifixion for the sake of divine redemptive purposes. (Chapter 3 will return to the role of crucifixion in those purposes.) The divine goal would be that we yield all we are and have, wholeheartedly, to a perfectly loving God for the sake of advancing divine redemptive purposes, in fellowship with God. This volitional cognitive model is hinted at in the remark attributed to Jesus in Jn. 7:17: "If anyone wills to do God's will, she will know whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own." This remark suggests a kind of knowing that makes a demand on the will of knowers relative to God's will. In particular, the relevant kind of knowing involves one's *willing* to do God's will. Such volitional knowing rarely surfaces in philosophical discussions of knowledge of God's reality, but we'll counter that deficiency in order to give Jewish and Christian monotheism a fair hearing.

Willingness to submit to God's will, even if it's an imperfect willingness, is central to volitionally knowing God as Lord. In seeking to be known volitionally as Lord (rather than as an object of casual speculation or voyeurism), a perfectly loving God would tailor purposively available evidence of divine reality to the volitional yielding of potential knowers. This would advance a redemptive aim to reconcile humans to God by transforming selfish human wills without thereby trivializing or otherwise devaluing evidence of God's perfectly authoritative sacred reality. Even if volitional factors figure in knowing humans *as persons* (and I suspect that they do), we have no basis for yielding to mere humans *as perfectly authoritative*. God alone, given a self-sufficiently perfect character, would merit such submission. Mere humans wouldn't qualify, owing to their lacking self-sufficiently perfect moral characters.

Volitional knowledge of God as perfectly authoritative Lord would call for a cognitive taxonomy beyond the familiar options of rationalism and empiricism. Pure rationalism about knowledge of God's reality, characterized broadly, implies that human reason is *the* source of knowledge of God's reality. Pure empiricism about knowledge of God's reality, also stated generally, implies that human (sensory or perceptual) experience is *the* source of knowledge of God's reality. Both positions have many prominent advocates in philosophy and theology, but popularity, here as elsewhere, doesn't vouchsafe truth. We actually need a third alternative.

Volitionalism about knowledge of God's reality, in contrast to pure rationalism and pure empiricism, implies that the human will is a central human "source" (or, perhaps better, "avenue") of conclusive evidence and knowledge

of God's reality. More accurately, it implies that the yielding of the human will to a demand of perfectly authoritative evidence from God is a central source, or avenue, *within humans* of conclusive evidence and knowledge of God's reality. God alone, of course, would be the *superhuman* origin of human evidence and knowledge of divine reality; so, we need to distinguish between a source within humans and a source independent of humans for conclusive evidence and knowledge of divine reality. Volitionalism thus gives a key role to perfectly authoritative evidence that is neglected by pure rationalism and pure empiricism. It excludes the dominance of spectator evidence found in such rationalism and empiricism, and preserves a cognitive role for divine *authority* that makes a demand on human wills. Volitionalism thus identifies the kind of available evidence and knowledge of divine reality we should expect of a perfectly authoritative and loving God with noncoercive redemptive purposes for humans.

6. SKEPTICAL TESTS

Skeptics will doubtless ask how we are to test for the *reliability* of the alleged perfectly authoritative evidence. The question is plausible, so long as it doesn't involve a test at odds *conceptually* with what is now being tested for: the reality of a perfectly loving God who, given hope for human redemption, would challenge us with perfectly authoritative evidence. That is, a proposed test shouldn't rule out *in principle* the reality or the suitable evidence of such a God. In addition, if we aim to make a perfectly loving God jump through cognitive hoops of our own making, we are bound to be disappointed. Such a God wouldn't play our intellectual games, given that they (including the ways we distortingly set our cognitive standards, such as in Humean empiricism, in logical positivism, or in Cartesian rationalism) typically insulate us from being challenged by authoritative evidence from a perfectly loving God. We should avoid prejudice and distortion on this front, of course, for the sake of trustworthy belief about whether a perfectly loving God actually exists. We gain nothing by begging the question, either negatively or affirmatively, with dubious cognitive standards.

A perfectly loving God wouldn't owe any human the preeminent role of a supposedly neutral judge over God, including in the cognitive domain. One consideration is that God would have no reason to suppose that selfish humans are indeed neutral. Another consideration is that humans, with their very limited cognitive and moral resources, would be in no position to serve as reliable judges over a perfectly loving God. In addition, God wouldn't owe humans any spectator evidence of divine reality, including any such evidence *before* God makes authoritative demands on them.

Humans do indeed need salient evidence of divine reality, including evidence of who God is, but a perfectly loving God could, and would, supply all needed evidence with purposively available perfectly authoritative evidence. This would be in keeping not only with a perfectly authoritative and loving divine character but also with a divine redemptive aim to transform human wills rather than to treat humans as innocent spectators. A perfectly loving God wouldn't pretend that humans are but spectators. Otherwise, God would be playing fast and loose with the truth about humans regarding their standing relative to a perfectly loving divine will. That would do humans no good at all; nor would it reflect well on God.

Agreeing with proponents of natural theology, some skeptics will demand that we begin with "mere-existence arguments" concerning God. Their demand would be to set aside any consideration of perfectly authoritative evidence for the sake of considering spectator evidence alone. The underlying aim of such a demand is typically to provide for "neutrality" or "impartiality" in the consideration of evidence. This demand is misguided, however, because in the case of a perfectly authoritative and loving God, the crucial *cognitive* role of a perfectly authoritative and loving character and purpose, including any redemptive purpose, must not be ignored or minimized by a demand for mere-existence arguments that exclude an authoritative call to fellowship with God. This book's epistemological approach upholds this important cognitive role, and thus avoids any biased demand for a "mere-existence argument." It aims thereby to highlight the explanatory, psychological, and existential richness in purposively available authoritative evidence that would be supplied by a perfectly loving God who offers volitional fellowship, including, in the case of wayward humans, redemption as reconciliation to God.

The purposively available evidence in question doesn't omit the perfectly authoritative and loving character inherent to a God worthy of worship for the sake of something less robust. It doesn't reduce, in particular, to dubious evidence of God as evidence of "something maximally powerful we know not what" independent of a perfectly authoritative and loving character. First-hand volitional evidence and knowledge of God's reality involve a *directness* in evidence and knowledge of divine reality that entails their being irreducible to mere propositional evidence or knowledge *that* God exists. The directness involves evidence of an "I-You" volitional interaction between humans and God that is absent from traditional arguments for God's existence. God's side of such a volitional interaction can be mediated via a human will, but it isn't reducible to a human will. My talk of (firsthand) evidence and knowledge of "God's reality" (or of "God") should be understood accordingly, as irreducible to mere propositional evidence or knowledge. Typically my talk of

(firsthand) evidence or knowledge of God's reality is interchangeable with talk of evidence or knowledge of God.

In seeking *agent-to-agent volitional interaction*, a perfectly loving God wouldn't need to offer *mere* propositional evidence or knowledge that God exists. In particular, a perfectly loving God wouldn't need to offer evidence of God's "reality" apart from evidence of who God is as perfectly authoritative and loving Lord. Indeed, God's reality would essentially be God's being perfectly authoritative and loving Lord worthy of worship. We aim to accommodate this consideration in the epistemology under development.

Existence evidence regarding a perfectly loving God's reality would be purposively available, in keeping with (and only in keeping with) God's authoritative character and purposes. It thus would come not as a needed preliminary to, but instead *through*, perfectly authoritative evidence of God's reality, including evidence of God's authoritative call to divine-human volitional fellowship. So, we shouldn't begin with a demand for mere-existence evidence that omits consideration of a perfectly authoritative call to divine-human fellowship. Instead, we should entertain any evidence of what a perfectly authoritative and loving God would do, has done, or is doing in terms of intervening in the lives of people. (Chapters 2 and 3 revisit this theme in detail.)

The proposed strategy will avoid the risk of being diverted to deism, mere theism, or something else less robust than the reality of a perfectly authoritative and loving God worthy of worship. We will thus highlight what would be God's offer of reconciliation to all people, even philosophically unsophisticated people, at least as long as there's divine hope of reconciliation. A person, in any case, wouldn't have to be able to follow intricate arguments to receive conclusive evidence of a perfectly loving God's reality. On the contrary, intricate arguments may actually get in the way of what really matters to a perfectly loving God: divine-human fellowship via volitional transformation of humans toward God's perfectly loving character.

Firsthand evidence of God's authoritative call to volitional fellowship wouldn't itself be an *argument* for God's existence. Instead, it would be akin to evidence from conscience regarding, for instance, either the duty (or call or conviction) to undertake an act of self-giving kindness or the duty (or call or conviction) not to perform an act of needless torture. Such evidence from conscience, although genuine, doesn't include an argument against skeptics, but this is no defect at all in the evidence from conscience. In addition, we can suppress such evidence, and we will typically dismiss it if we *will* or intend to do something in conflict with it. Still, the evidence from conscience is genuine, and can even be conclusive if it's unaccompanied by defeaters.

Defeaters can arise directly or indirectly. A *direct* defeater of initial evidence for a claim consists of additional evidence (not to be confused with mere beliefs) that significantly challenges *the support* of the initial evidence for the claim in question. Consider, for instance, my initial visual evidence indicating that there's a bent stick submerged halfway in a tub of water before me. The support it initially offers can be defeated by my additional visual evidence indicating, from a broader visual perspective, that my initial visual evidence fails, when conjoined with my broader evidence, to indicate that there's a bent stick before me. In contrast, an *indirect* defeater of initial evidence consists of evidence that significantly challenges *the truth indicated* by that initial evidence. For instance, my visual evidence indicating that there's a cup before me can be defeated by my broader visual and tactile evidence indicating that *only* a holographic image of a cup is before me. Such defeaters indicate that evidence can be defeated (and is thus defeasible) in two ways by additional evidence (but not by mere beliefs, contrary to many philosophers, since beliefs can be altogether lacking in supporting evidence). Fallibilists about evidence, who hold that evidence can be misleading, will welcome this lesson about defeaters. (For elaboration on the role of defeaters in evidence, justification, and knowledge, see Moser 1989.)

Evidence of God's call to fellowship and repentance would be fallible (possibly misleading) and defeasible (possibly defeated), but could nonetheless be accurate and conclusive in the absence of falsifiers and undefeated defeaters. Such evidence would come to wayward humans with a challenge in conscience indicating that we have fallen short of a perfectly loving God's unselfish ways. This wouldn't be strong, or dominating, coercion of our attention or of our will, because we would be free to reject or to ignore such evidence instead of receiving it for what it is intended to be. In addition, if we received such evidence as actually including a challenge from God, we could still choose to disobey or to ignore the challenge. God would thus treat recipients of a divine challenge as responsible persons rather than coerced pawns, as objects of divine love rather than of dominating coercion. Genuine love, we've suggested, must take the risk of rejection, because it refuses to depersonalize any responsible person with dominating coercion of that person's will regarding the reception of love.

Skeptics are notorious for demanding cogent *arguments*, but genuine evidence, as suggested above, doesn't necessarily include an argument. For example, a person may have undefeated experiential evidence (owing to visual attention-attraction by a red patch, which is not an argument) indicating that there's a red patch in her visual field, but she could still lack an argument for the claim that there's a red patch in her visual field. So, our

having evidence, even evidence that satisfies the justification-condition for knowledge, doesn't necessarily include our having a non-questionbegging argument, or any argument, against skeptics. Whether an argument is non-questionbegging varies with the questions actually raised in an exchange (cf. Moser 1993, chap. 1). Evidence itself, however, is not exchange-relative in this way. Skeptics, then, shouldn't confuse having evidence with either having or giving an argument.

Our *having* evidence doesn't entail our *giving* an answer or a claim of any kind. Consider, for instance, how our having a particular sensory experience need not include our giving an answer to a question. Evidence can be present for a person (owing to salient attention-attraction by that evidence) without being described by that person in order to answer skeptical questions. Accordingly, we shouldn't consider one to be without evidence simply because one lacks a non-questionbegging argument relative to an extreme skeptic's questions. One's supporting evidence could still be cognitively impeccable, despite one's lacking the kind of argument demanded by a skeptic. An unbridled skeptical demand for "argument" of a preferred sort often blinds skeptics from seeing that "evidence" need not include an argument at all (see this book's Appendix and Moser 2004a for problems facing extreme skepticism and a non-questionbegging reply to such skepticism). We should, in any case, invite skeptics to consider the kind of evidence suitable to a perfectly authoritative and loving God who would seek redemptive transformation on the basis of authoritative evidence rather than spectator evidence.

Acknowledgment of a perfectly authoritative and loving God with redemptive purposes may offer unmatched explanatory value regarding such matters as who we are as morally accountable persons and why we as such persons have come into existence at all. The overall cognitive reasonableness of robust theistic belief could thus be supported, at least in part, by such belief's yielding a best available undefeated explanation on the basis of the whole range of our experience and other evidence. (See Niebuhr 1949, chap. 10, for use of Pascal's *Pensées* to outline such an argument; cf. Banner 1990, chap. 6, Wiebe 2004, chap. 3.) This could be a plausible strategy if, and only if, it steers clear of questionbegging probability assignments and supplies a lucid notion of explanation that is cognitively relevant. (See Moser 1989 for a detailed effort to meet such challenges in connection with empirical justification and knowledge.)

Regardless of the details about explanation, the foundational evidence of God's reality would be irreducibly a matter of one's *experiencing*, via attention-attraction in conscience, what is evidently God's perfectly authoritative personal call to one to live in divine-human fellowship. As suggested,

because God is inherently personal (if real), we should expect the foundational evidence of God's existence to be likewise personal, and not itself a premise or a conclusion in an argument, whether deductive, inductive, or abductive, even though one could, of course, formulate premises and draw conclusions on the basis of the relevant foundational evidence. (Chapter 2 returns to the topic of theism and best available explanation.)

One's firsthand experience of what is evidently God's authoritative call, as suggested, wouldn't be an argument of any kind; nor would it be a propositional answer to skeptical questions. Instead, it would be experiential acquaintance, involving attention-attraction, with what is evidently God's authoritative call on a person's life, via that person's conscience. Consider a situation where the best available undefeated explanation of such an experience is that a perfectly authoritative and loving God has actually intervened in one's life with a call to volitional fellowship with God. Many relatively normal people would suggest that their own experience exemplifies just such a situation, and they aren't in an asylum or otherwise irrational. In that situation, as Chapter 2 will explain, one would have the evidential resources for a plausible argument for the cognitive reasonableness and even the truth of robust theism. Still, the perfect authority one thereby identified would rest in God's authoritative character, and the foundational evidence would reside in one's experience of what is evidently God's personal intervention, not in an argument involving best available explanation. The foundational evidence in experiential acquaintance with what is evidently a personal God wouldn't reduce to a premise, a conclusion, or an argument of any kind, and this is in keeping with experiential foundational evidence in general (on which see Moser 1989).

Of course, not just any challenging call to us in conscience would qualify as divine. Our use of "God" as a morally preeminent title has definite hard edges, and that's a good thing. If a call promotes hate toward people, it isn't from a perfectly loving God, although it may be from a bad imposter. False gods could oppose the true God, and they would be known for what they are relative to the benchmark of perfectly unselfish love as a corrective to selfish 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. A perfectly loving God could thus be put to the test, even by us, as long as the test is fitting and fair in light of the properly demanding standard of *worthiness of worship*.

If God could be put to the test for authenticity, we humans could be put to the test too. Some immediate test questions for us humans, including skeptics, are: (1) Are we *willing* to receive a perfectly loving God's authoritative call

to us for what it is intended to be, including a challenging call for enemy-love and enemy-forgiveness? (2) Are we *willing* to engage in the attentive discernment integral to receiving with due care and respect a perfectly loving God's authoritative call? (3) Having received God's authoritative call for what it is intended to be, are we *willing* to be correctively judged and then remade by the power of a perfectly loving God's unselfish love? (4) Are we *willing* to let a perfectly loving God be God even in our own lives, that is, the Lord whose will is perfectly authoritative and supreme for us regarding our own attitudes, actions, and lives? If we honestly answer yes to these questions, we can fruitfully begin to "test for" God's reality. If we can't honestly answer yes, we have to ask if we ourselves obstruct available evidence of God's reality. The cognitive problem may not be with God, after all; instead, a simple hand mirror held at face level, in that case, may reveal where (or, better, *who*) the real problem is.

A suitable test for God's reality would ask, among other things, if any of us has undefeated evidence of the intervention of a perfectly authoritative and loving being worthy of worship. In this connection, we should ask whether there is a potentially sacred place deep within us, beneath the noise and the clutter of this dying world, for receiving divine self-revelation. This would be a place deep in conscience, beyond the superficialities of our lives, where we could receive, and even interact with, the authoritative voice of a perfectly loving God who calls us to turn from selfishness and selfish fear to be remade wholeheartedly after God's morally perfect character. This voice would be the perfectly authoritative but "still, small voice" that reportedly challenged the ancient Hebrew prophet Elijah, among many others, and visited Jesus on various occasions.

Perhaps relatively few people have actually listened for a divine voice with an inclination to take it seriously, because it could change one's life dramatically and put worldly success and social acceptance at risk. Its challenge would be morally serious and thoroughgoing, and thus likely to be rejected or ignored by many people who find it inconvenient or troublesome given their selfish purposes, including perhaps an aim to be ultimately indifferent regarding divine reality. Here we would have a definite clash between a typical human will and the distinctive will of a perfectly loving God.

The perfect authority of God's call would be palpable and transforming when one's conscience is suitably receptive. The divine call wouldn't be a dominating, depersonalizing sledgehammer, but would treat people instead as morally responsible persons. People could thus ignore, suppress, or even reject a divine call to reconciliation via human repentance and divine-human fellowship. Ultimately, however, God's own perfectly authoritative and loving

character would yield the correct foundational answers to our suitable test questions, for God to pass the test for divine reality. Otherwise, God would depend ultimately on something other than God's own character to answer our test questions correctly, and thus would lack inherent supreme cognitive authority. In that case, God wouldn't be perfectly authoritative, given ultimate dependence for authority on something other than God's own character. God wouldn't then be inherently worthy of worship, and thus wouldn't satisfy the preeminent title "God."

One's having perfect cognitive authority doesn't entail that one is beyond suitable test questions. It entails rather that one perfectly satisfies what it is to be cognitively authoritative, even if one *could* fail the test. If God would be praiseworthy for being perfectly authoritative, as seems plausible, then we should allow that God *could* fail the test, even if God doesn't actually fail it. So, we shouldn't infer that a perfectly authoritative God would have absolutely free cognitive reign, as if *whatever God happened to will* would be cognitively acceptable. The point instead is that God's cognitive authority would proceed, in keeping with the preeminent divine title, by the perfect authority of God's own perfectly loving character. Evidence of God's reality would fit with this perfect authority, the authority of God's own perfectly loving character.

An authoritatively and morally perfect divine character would anchor and guide divine willing, thus avoiding arbitrariness in divine willing. So, we have no cognitive analogue to Plato's Euthyphro problem, where mere divine willing of whatever sort would create merit. God's perfectly loving character, rather than an arbitrary will, would have ultimate perfect authority. In addition, a being who lacked a perfectly loving character would also lack worthiness of worship, and thus be disqualified to hold the title "God." God, then, would have to meet the preeminent standard of divinity, namely, inherent worthiness of worship, but wouldn't, and couldn't, rely ultimately on an independent authority to meet this standard. (The next section returns to this point.)

Skeptics will rightly note that even if God's character *would* be perfectly authoritative, we need good reason to suppose that the divine character is *actually instantiated* in the real world and thus is no *merely imaginary* construct. Is there really a divine agent who calls one to repentance and fellowship, or, alternatively, is the call in question illusory? This issue can't plausibly be dismissed, if shallow dogmatism is to be avoided. At a minimum, then, we must consider that "... an experience, strongly religious in tone, seeming *sui generis*, ... can come to be seen by the person concerned in altogether a new light, as an encounter not with the transcendent but with some buried

element of his own early life, transposed, as it were, into a strange unfamiliar key: but if unfamiliar, then still recognized as his own by an insight equally compelling and authoritative as the original judgement about its self-evident transcendent origin” (Hepburn 1958, p. 47; cf. Hepburn 1963, p. 48). This is certainly the case, and it would be foolish to suggest otherwise.

From a cognitive point of view, we should let the actual evidence, or truth-indicators, in a case (rather than mere possibilities, beliefs, or interpretations) determine what is cognitively grounded and what isn’t. For instance, if I have no indication whatever that “some buried element of [my] own early life” is now generating my religious experience, I’ll lack evidence that the experience is illusory *on that basis* regarding divine reality, even if the experience is illusory. My experience *might* have yielded a defeating indicator that I’m undergoing a hallucination, for instance, but it actually doesn’t, and this is cognitively important regarding what my experience indicates. In the absence of any indication of an illusory experience, I can’t justifiably infer that my experience is illusory. In this regard, at least, religious experience parallels sensory and perceptual experience, including the kind of experience underlying knowledge in the natural and social sciences. We do well, of course, to avoid any cavalier rejection of all knowledge in the natural and social sciences.

Skeptics may still have this worry: “Neither felt uniqueness, degree of intensity, nor any other factor I can isolate in [religious] experience guarantees that it is a veridical cognitive experience, that the experience is being correctly interpreted [as an experience of divine reality]... The situation looks ambivalent in respect of theistic or naturalistic interpretations” (Hepburn 1963, p. 49). Of course, an experiential situation *could* be ambivalent between a theistic interpretation and a naturalistic interpretation, but that doesn’t entail that all experiential situations will *actually* be thus ambivalent. As always, we do well here to let the relevant evidence, or truth-indicators, determine cognitively rational belief, and this requires attention to the actual truth-indicators in an experiential situation. It is deeply misleading, however, to put all the weight on what a religious experience “guarantees,” as if experiential evidence for a truth must *guarantee* that truth. By that standard, sensory and perceptual evidence would very rarely, if ever, justify a belief that a physical object exists or that perceptual objects of the sciences exist, because we can readily imagine massive hallucination that challenges any alleged guarantee based on such evidence. Once again, we are well advised to avoid cavalier skeptical inferences that dismiss experiential knowledge wholesale.

We can entertain cognitively reasonable removal of the ambivalence both-ering skeptics if we acknowledge two plausible considerations. First, a claim

can acquire cognitive reasonableness for one in virtue of its undefeated superior explanatory value relative to the full range of one's experience and other evidence (on which see Moser 1989; cf. Lycan 2002, Wiebe 2004). Second, one could have, as the Introduction noted, *interactive* diachronic experiential evidence that involves evident interaction, perhaps via one's conscience, between God's will and one's own will. Consider, then, a case where the undefeated best available explanation of my experience is that I have volitional interaction, say via my conscience, between God's will and my own will, whereby God challenges me repeatedly to repent of my selfish tendency to refuse to do what is best for my enemies. I have, let's assume, a hard time loving my enemies, especially those I have to face directly in my life.

In the imagined case, we may suppose, I have no indication either that *I am calling myself* to repent or that *I even want* to repent; nor do I have any indication that the call to repentance is coming either from my own history or from some other merely human or worldly source. I *might* have had such an indication, of course, but I actually don't. In addition, I evidently am in a volitional interaction, an experienced give-and-take of wills, where my will is being challenged repeatedly by a morally superior will that calls for perfect love even for one's (including *my*) enemies. This volitionally interactive "wrestling in conscience" fits perfectly with what would be an intervention by a perfectly loving God, and nothing in my experience or my evidence in general counts significantly against either the reality or my evidence of this intervention.

My experiential evidence in favor of divine intervention is, we may suppose, undefeated for me, even after my careful and extensive reflection on many alleged defeaters offered by rather shrewd skeptics over many centuries. In such a case, the aforementioned ambivalence bothering skeptics could be reasonably removed for a person, relative to that person's overall evidence. I have offered a sufficient condition for its removal, but I don't offer it as a necessary condition, because we shouldn't require extensive consideration of skeptical objections by all people. (Chapter 2 will develop a related line of undefeated theistic evidence, and offer a straightforward argument to answer skeptics.)

The plot thickens, as it typically does in cognitive matters about a perfectly loving God. Humans on their own may be largely (but not completely) blind and deaf, metaphorically speaking, relative to purposively available evidence of a perfectly loving God. This is undeniably a live option, echoed throughout the New Testament, even if it is neglected among skeptics in particular and philosophers of religion in general. So, humans may be in need of *God* to open their "eyes and ears" (again, metaphorically speaking) to receive aright

the purposively available authoritative evidence of God's reality. We may see vague glimmers and hear muted echoes of God's reality intruding in our awareness, but we may need God to give us new eyes to see and ears to hear (that is, a new cognitive perspective to receive aright) evidence of God's reality with some transparency.

We may need noncoercive cognitive help *from God* in our coming to know God's reality, and we may need *freely to ask* God for such help in light of initial vague glimmers of divine reality. We do well, here and elsewhere, to avoid commitment to total bondage of the human will (of the kind suggested by Augustine, Luther, and Calvin), in order to leave room for some genuine human responsibility. Perhaps, nonetheless, we need to be empowered by God, at our free request, to value unselfish love aright as cognitively and morally crucial regarding volitional knowledge of divine reality. God would thus be indispensable as our helper even regarding our receiving evidence of God's reality with some clarity, but human free will would also have a critical role. It wouldn't follow that we risk a circular argument, since we're concerned now with purposively available evidence more basic than an argument. Skeptics have consistently avoided consideration of this live option, perhaps because they suffer from a serious cognitive blind spot in this area. The blind spot may arise from an uncritical assumption characteristic of skeptics regarding the propriety only of spectator evidence regarding divine reality. In any case, we do well to overcome cognitive blind spots in this connection.

God may be Lord over what we need in order to receive evidence of God's reality with some transparency, and skeptics should give careful attention to this viable cognitive option. We would, on this option, be in a position of genuine *cognitive* need and dependence relative to God, even if we think otherwise. This would fit with the aim of a perfectly loving God to affirm our proper status as *cognitively* dependent creatures of God and to challenge our prideful assumptions of self-reliance in the cognitive domain.

Pretensions of self-reliance and self-approval emerge with a vengeance in cognitive areas of life, where we readily take self-credit and easily overlook that a perfectly loving God would operate by grace, or unmerited gift, rather than by any human earning that obligates God to reward humans. This is difficult but needed news for those of us accustomed to the ways of self-crediting human achievement. The tyranny of human earning dies hard indeed in cognitive and other areas of human life, because we pridefully tend to think that we have outgrown significant dependence on anyone else, particularly in the assessment of available evidence regarding ultimate matters. We gladly suppose that we have become mature and even "independent," especially in

matters of evidence regarding God's existence. Perhaps we need to rethink carefully here, because we may actually be indebted to, and dependent on, a perfectly authoritative and loving God.

7. TRUST AND DISTRUST

A perfectly loving God who seeks human redemption as divine-human reconciliation would aim to build human trust in (that is, reliance on) God *on God's terms*, and not necessarily on humans' preferred 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 aren't fully satisfied, and we all suffer from evil and its effects, each and every day. In addition, we shall all undergo physical death some day, perhaps sooner than we think. What, then, could God be trusted *for*? Skeptics about God might answer: for *nothing at all*. In any case, they doubt that the God in question actually exists, on the ground that they find no compelling cognitive reason to acknowledge divine reality.

The best answer to our question is this: God, if real, could be trusted for what God has *actually promised*, in keeping, of course, with God's perfectly loving character. One reported promise from the Jewish and Christian God stands out: the redemptive promise to remain forever in fellowship with God's human children who are willing to be in such fellowship as God frees them from deadly idols by bringing them into volitional conformity with God's self-giving crucified and resurrected human Son, Jesus. Contrary to much popular religion, this does *not* include a promise to save God's human children from temporary pain, suffering, frustration, tragedy, poverty, illness, deformity, or even physical death. It is rather a promise of God's abiding and transforming redemptive presence with God's willing people, *come what may*.

Many people desire something contrary to the divine promise in question (for example, a paradise of pleasure on earth now, perhaps with God as their cooperative vending machine), and thus, by their own admission, have no interest whatever in the divine promise. The desire for something contrary to the divine promise could easily yield a serious cognitive disconnect between these people and a perfectly loving God. Misguided human expectations regarding God can blind people from seeing (evidence of) God's reality even when it's right at hand. So, we should be careful of what we expect, since it may rob us of needed sight and thus of needed apprehension of evidence regarding divine reality.

Skeptics will promptly ask: why should we accept any such answer regarding God's reliability? Such a reason-seeking why-question comes easy and

often for them, and that's not itself a defect at all. In fact, it may be a cognitive virtue. We should try to answer all such sober questions, because they helpfully test a proposed position for its reason-based support or its lack thereof. Skeptics themselves will recommend that we simply withhold judgment on the issue of divine reliability. This recommendation, however, is too quick. Whether skeptical or not, we need to pause to assess the will-oriented cognitive position under development.

Part of the needed answer to skeptics has already emerged. As suggested above, we can't give *spectator* evidence of divine reality (free of a volitional challenge) to skeptics or to any other humans; nor should we expect or want to be able to do so. The opposing view makes a category mistake about the relevant evidence of divine reality. Instead, taking a judicious approach, we should consider whether perfectly *authoritative* evidence regarding divine reality is actually available to us humans under certain circumstances. Such evidence would call people to trust, and thereby to be volitionally conformed to, a perfectly loving God, even in the face of temporary pain, suffering, frustration, tragedy, poverty, illness, deformity, or physical death (perhaps even all of these combined in one massively frustrating challenge). The evidence in question would call people to trust God with regard to *God's perfectly authoritative and loving promises* rather than our own (often confused and fleeting) desires.

The perfectly authoritative evidence would come, if at all, from God's call via God's intervening Spirit, the same call and Spirit that reportedly led Jesus into his notorious trials in the wilderness, in Gethsemane, and on Calvary. (See any of the New Testament Gospels for an outline of his trials.) Few people would seem capable to predict with any exactness on their own the ways of God's perfectly loving call to divine-human volitional fellowship. Our selfish natural expectation, and that of many avowedly Christian churches, is that God's beloved children should always triumph and reign on royal, comfortable thrones of worldly success, with plenty of money, food, and clout. Washing the feet of our enemies with an unearned offer of forgiveness, in any case, isn't on our agenda, even as a remote backup plan. Too often people want a predictable God like us, and this want corrodes and corrupts human expectations of evidence of divine reality.

The question now facing skeptics is this: are they *willing* to receive an authoritative divine call for what it is intended to be, and, in that case, to come to trust God as authoritative Lord over their lives? Or, alternatively, is their *unwillingness* to do so interfering somehow with their receiving some purposively available authoritative evidence of God's reality (say, in virtue of distorting how they attend to or interpret some available evidence)? Have they

put themselves in a cognitive position unfavorable to receiving some of the distinctive evidence in question? At a minimum, skeptics must honestly face such questions, however unfamiliar the questions are to ordinary skeptical ways of thinking.

Skeptics suffer from a cognitive blind spot in neglecting that a perfectly loving God would offer purposively available authoritative evidence of divine reality that aims to transform our wills in the direction of God's perfectly loving will. The clash between humans and a perfectly loving God would be mainly a matter of conflicting wills (human selfish wills in conflict with God's perfectly loving will) rather than merely intellectual ideas. Merely intellectual human obstacles would be comparatively superficial and easily handled by God. Selfish human wills, in contrast, may be cognitively intractable in interfering with receiving some purposively available evidence of God's reality. Skeptics, among others, owe this live option serious consideration.

Opposing destructive human ways, a perfectly loving God would promote a grand divide between two matters: (a) what God aims to do for us without our earning or meriting (and is to be received as a gift via suitably grounded trust in God) and (b) what we have accomplished on our own relative to our supposedly earning or meriting security with God in a way that obligates God to honor or benefit us. This is a divide between *divine grace* (or, unmerited gift) and *human earning*. It allows that God can work noncoercively toward human redemption through our wills and intellects, but it disallows that we "earn" our cognitive or moral standing before God by our obligating God to credit us with what we aim to achieve. The common approach to religion as requiring human earning toward God, rampant among followers of all theistic religions, runs afoul of the conception of God as perfectly loving. It fosters a conception of God as grudging and close-fisted, with human earning as the key to open God's otherwise closed hand. God thus ends up looking a lot like us ungenerous humans, and religion becomes a reflection of us rather than of a perfectly loving God. Much religion in circulation is just that, of course, and thus merits its dubious reputation and even rejection.

In the cognitive domain, a perfectly loving God would be revealed by grace rather than by human earning for a straightforward redemptive reason. A God who seeks human redemption via conciliatory volitional knowledge of divine reality would seek to deflate human pride, boasting, and self-credit, and to promote instead ultimate humble trust in the only One who can sustain humans in life. This would be part of God's redemptive purpose toward humans, if God had any hope left for human redemption. There could come a time when such divine hope runs out, and a perfectly loving

God would be no fool or fraud about the prospects for redemption of humans. Evidence of a perfectly loving God's reality, we've noted, would be suited to a divine redemptive purpose, as long as divine hope for redemption lasted. It would thus be perfectly authoritative evidence initiated by God without human earning, and it would thereby call for human volitional knowledge of God as perfectly authoritative Lord. This important consideration is rarely, if ever, considered by skeptics or by philosophers generally. We are undoing this deficiency now, and thereby providing a fair hearing where it is long overdue.

The kind of ultimate trust promoted by a perfectly loving God would be doubly ultimate: *purposively* ultimate and *cognitively* ultimate. *Purposively ultimate trust* in God would be trust in God, but wouldn't be *merely* a means to another end. One might trust God as a means to various other ends (including health, wealth, social standing, or physical survival, as is selfishly emphasized in many avowedly Christian churches), but *purposively* ultimate trust in God wouldn't depend on such instrumental trust. It would be trust in God as an *end in itself*, for its own sacred value owing to God's sacred value. Such trust would exclude trusting in God *solely* as a means to another end, and accordingly would give God the honor worthy of God inherently in the area of human trust. It thus wouldn't use God *just* as a means to some independent end. The Gift-Giver would be the inherent sacred gift in such trust.

Cognitively ultimate, or foundational, trust in God (which entails belief that God exists) could get its undefeated foundational cognitive support, or evidence, for a person from that person's salient *experience*, via attention-attraction, of what is evidently God's perfectly authoritative, trust-inviting call revealed in conscience to that person. This well-founded basic trust would require the absence of undefeated evidential defeaters, such as equally authoritative or illuminating competing calls, but such absence of defeaters wouldn't be an evidential addition to the (positive) foundational cognitive support for trust in God. The mere absence of undefeated defeaters doesn't amount to or entail positive cognitive support. God, on the present scenario, would have ultimate cognitive authority, owing to a perfectly authoritative and loving divine character, and thus would be well-positioned to invite and to support cognitively ultimate human trust in God.

A feature (such as undefeated maximal explanatory power) in virtue of which a claim has positive cognitive status need not itself be part of *the evidence* for that claim. The evidence for the claim would be its undefeated truth-indicator (a truth-indicator that is, for instance, best explained by that claim). We shouldn't confuse *how* something has its truth indicated (say, in

virtue of its explanatory power or its being entailed by a well-grounded proposition) with *what*, in particular, indicates its truth (say, a particular experience explained or a particular entailing proposition). One's evidence, *E*, for a proposition, *P*, is evidence in virtue of a particular truth-indicating feature, but one's having *E* for *P* doesn't entail one's knowing what makes *E* evidence for *P* or even what *E* is evidence in virtue of. In short, one's having evidence doesn't require one's understanding what evidence is. So, a person could have conclusive evidence for believing that God exists without being able to explain what the relevant evidence consists in.

Perhaps Dietrich Bonhoeffer has cognitively ultimate trust in mind when he writes as follows:

Faith is when the search for certainty out of *visible* evidence is given up. Then it is faith in God and not in the world. The only assurance which faith accepts is the Word [of God] itself, which comes to me through Christ (1978, p. 110, italics mine).

One's moving beyond *visible* evidence or even beyond spectator evidence in general doesn't entail, of course, one's moving beyond *all* evidence. A move beyond all evidence would be a move into cognitive arbitrariness and thus cognitive irrationality. We won't, and shouldn't, go there, as cognitively responsible truth-seekers. In contrast with imperfect humans, a perfectly loving God whose character exemplified worthiness of worship wouldn't need *another* voice, word, or authority to authenticate God's own perfectly authoritative call to humans for the sake of redemption as reconciliation. God's own perfectly authoritative character could supply the needed authoritative authentication. An unlimited regress of needed authoritative voices, words, or standards thus fails to threaten. Skeptics will find no skeptical foothold here; nor should they want one. One's *wanting* to dislodge evidence of a perfectly loving God would signal not truth-seeking but rather a troubling cognitive bias *against* divine reality. Skeptics would thus do well to reconsider their motives, and the rest of us would too.

Cognitively ultimate trust in God is cognitively *foundational* trust in God. We can ask the following question to illuminate such trust. *Whose* voice has, and should have, primary cognitive authority for me: my voice or God's? We can put a similar question in different terms. *Which* personal relationship has, and should have, primary cognitive authority for me: my relationship *with myself* or my relationship *with God*? Philosophers, including skeptics, rarely take up this question, even though the question is vitally important in revealing cognitive priorities. Clearly, if I don't even acknowledge the reality of God's authoritative voice, God's voice won't have primary cognitive

authority *for me*, at least in terms of what I *acknowledge*. The natural skeptical response is to infer that there is (at least in all likelihood) no voice of God to be heard at all. That quick response is, however, much too quick, as we'll see in detail. We need to let the relevant evidence have its way, even apart from any of our opposing wants and hopes.

The cognitively careful response would ask: am *I* somehow blocking myself, intentionally or unintentionally, from suitably receiving God's perfectly authoritative and loving call to fellowship? Perhaps I have set myself against trusting God above all else, owing to a preference to trust *myself* instead above all else. In that case, I'll be disinclined to welcome and perhaps even to acknowledge God's authoritative call to fellowship. I may then prefer to ignore it, given the exalted status I've assigned to myself and my own basic preferences. Skeptics about God's reality should examine whether they are in just such a cognitive position relative to God. They must ask, in particular, whether they suffer a *cognitive* deficiency owing to an implicit bias against, if not outright resistance to, God's perfect authority in the cognitive domain and elsewhere. Here, then, is an unfinished but urgent project for skeptics about divine reality.

Can we reasonably trust skeptics about God's reality to be sincerely open with regard to receiving evidence of God's authoritative call to humans? Many people will hesitate to say yes, given an initially plausible suspicion of bias in skeptics about God's reality. This doesn't settle anything, of course, but it suggests a problem worthy of attention. Suppose that I in particular have saliently experienced undefeated evidence of God's authoritative call to fellowship in a life-enhancing way similarly reported by many morally and cognitively responsible people. (We could name names, but we won't digress.) Why, then, should I give cognitive priority to the (now questionable) doubts about God's reality from skeptics about divine reality? Why should I trust that skeptics are better evaluators of evidence regarding the reality of God's call to fellowship, especially given that cognitive modesty seems rare among skeptics about God's reality? The latter is evidenced by the typically uncritical ways they wield their own skeptical cognitive standards and demands. Hume (1780) and Russell (1953) are familiar textbook examples of philosophers who wield an implausible empiricist spectator standard regarding the issue of God's existence and who have a substantial heritage among philosophers. It would seem cognitively unreasonable for me, given my aforementioned undefeated evidence, to yield relative cognitive authority to skeptics about divine reality. I would need some special reason to do so, but I have none. In particular, I have no undefeated defeater of my experiential evidence of God's call and reality.

At a minimum, if skeptics about God's reality want people reasonably to agree with them, they must identify the needed cognitive support for their skepticism. In particular, they should identify an undefeated defeater of the perfectly authoritative evidence mentioned above, and a mere *opposing belief* won't serve (because a belief can be altogether lacking in supporting evidence). They would also do well to give us a good cognitive reason to believe that their evaluating evidence for the reality of God's authoritative call to fellowship is at least as reliable as that of careful nonskeptics. Even prior to that, they would do well to give us a good cognitive reason to believe that they are genuinely *willing* to listen attentively for God's authoritative call, despite their skeptical tendencies. I, for one, remain doubtful on these fronts with regard to skeptics, at least until the needed evidence is in. Skeptical doubts themselves remain distinctly questionable, and subject to skepticism, regarding their bearing on purposively available authoritative evidence of divine reality. If we're going to give skepticism a worthwhile hearing, as we definitely should, then we will have to raise skeptical questions even about skeptical doubts. Hence the present challenge to skeptics about God's reality. We can now fairly shift the explanatory burden to them. They now have their explanatory cognitive work cut out.

8. VOICE LESSONS

The authoritative call of a perfectly loving God to divine-human fellowship would manifest the power of perfect self-giving love. This would be a call to people to turn from (that is, repent of) their selfish ways through obedient fellowship with an unselfish, perfectly loving God. Apprehending the power of God's call accurately would be to apprehend it *as the perfectly authoritative call from a God worthy of worship*. This would require apprehending it as authoritative over other voices and wills, including over my own voice and will. So, apprehending God's call accurately would require my apprehending that I *should* (be willing to) yield to God's call. I thus couldn't consistently deem my own voice and will as ultimately authoritative, given the supreme authority of God. This could be difficult and humbling for me, if I have an unduly exalted, prideful view of myself or if I'm wedded to prideful despair.

Suppose that I would be unwilling to yield to God's call to fellowship after having apprehended God's call accurately. I may not *want* to yield on this front, because giving ground here would seem to challenge my very self-definition and everything else I have supposedly self-achieved and credited to myself. I would then be left with a serious cognitive-volitional disconnect, because I would then *apprehend* correctly that I *should* yield to God's

authoritative call but still remain *unwilling* to yield to God's call. My will would then be out of line with what I have apprehended correctly regarding God's authoritative will, namely, that it is authoritative for myself and other humans. In that case, I may very well try to sidestep the disconnect by denying that I have actually apprehended God's call. I would then purchase cognitive-volitional coherence at the price of denying what I have actually apprehended. A skeptic in such a position wouldn't be a reliable guide to cognitive matters concerning (evidence of) the reality of God's call. Many skeptics may be in such a compromised position, owing to an unwillingness to yield to any divine call.

Someone might propose that *acknowledging* God's call as authoritative is itself an act of yielding one's will to God. The problem, however, is that yielding one's will to God in the manner required by a perfectly loving God is *not* entailed by one's merely acknowledging God (or, God's call) as authoritative. *Acknowledging* something regarding God doesn't entail, and so isn't the same as, *yielding one's will to God with an attitude of obedience* toward God's will. An authoritative perfectly loving God would rightly avoid trivializing or otherwise devaluing divine revelation in the presence of people unwilling to yield to God's will. This would fit with the sharp 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 without loss rather than sacred. It would be in the best interest of everyone, including any person not morally ready to obey God's perfectly loving will, for God not to devalue God's character or self-revelation as if it were a disposable commodity.

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. A perfectly loving God wouldn't be cognitively promiscuous in this way, and that would be a good divine trait, even for skeptics. Given a divine commitment to redeem humans, God would have and pursue the redemptive aim to transform our selfish wills into wills genuinely loving toward all persons, even enemies. This aim would inform the character of divine revelation for our own good in such a way that cognitive promiscuity of any kind would be excluded from divine revelation. In this regard, God would differ from many humans in the way they superficially reveal themselves, and this feature of God would be praiseworthy and good for all concerned. Divine evidence would be designed not for mere spectators but for humans in need of an authoritative divine challenge toward repentance and divine-human volitional fellowship.

A perfectly loving God, given a redemptive aim toward humans, would try to supply noncoercively what we truly *need*, however much we resist it or don't

want it. Indeed, this effort would seek to break down our selfish willfulness and fear even in the cognitive domain, where we set up cognitive standards to serve our own imperfect purposes and thereby block divine purposes. For our own good, as suggested, divine self-revelation would come through perfectly authoritative evidence for the sake of volitional knowledge of God as perfectly authoritative Lord. The stretching of our cognitive comfort zone would thus be mandatory, and good too. Perhaps, then, we would even find true gain in the temporary pain of cognitive discomfort.

Proper, obedient reception of perfectly authoritative evidence from God would avoid the aforementioned cognitive-volitional disconnect. God's will (promoting unselfish love in place of our selfishness) would thus become mine too as I yield my will to God's will in volitional knowledge of God as perfectly authoritative Lord. Until skeptics about God's reality have dealt carefully and honestly with the option of perfectly authoritative evidence beyond spectator evidence, we should be altogether skeptical about their skepticism. We should doubt meanwhile that they are in a suitable position to report on the reality of God or on purposively available evidence of the reality of God. They would do well, accordingly, to supply evidence that they aren't in a position akin to that of the willful child who refuses to receive the challenging available parental evidence regarding his troubled situation.

Clearly, "out of mind" doesn't entail "out of reality." "Out of mind and evidence" may stem just from a volitional shortcoming on the part of a person reluctant to receive purposively available evidence for what it is intended to be: in the present case, an evident divine challenge toward human redemption as divine-human reconciliation. It's time that this option get a fair hearing among skeptics and philosophers generally. Otherwise, a cognitive blind spot will continue to threaten suitable reception of available evidence.

Skeptics about God's reality typically fail to acknowledge the kind of cognitive difference we should expect between a perfectly loving God (if God exists) and ourselves (if we exist). In particular, they typically assume, if implicitly, that since we humans are content with spectator evidence as a basis for ordinary knowledge, God would be too, *even regarding knowledge of God's reality*. Skeptics thereby neglect cognitively important features of a perfectly authoritative and loving divine character, such as the fact that a redemptive God would seek, with perfect authority, to transform selfish human wills into unselfish, perfectly loving wills, without pretending that humans are just innocent spectators. To the extent that skeptics neglect this, they neglect a central place for purposively available authoritative evidence and volitional knowledge regarding divine reality. Traditional philosophy, including traditional skepticism about God's reality, is marked and crippled

by this serious neglect. In identifying this cognitive blind spot, we may hope that it soon gets the attention it deserves. Meanwhile, we may also plausibly remain skeptical about skepticism about God's reality.

Skeptics will likely object as follows. If I, for instance, am willing to submit to God's will, as volitional knowledge of God's reality requires, then I may very well be *biased in favor* of theism in a way that taints me cognitively. I can't then be trusted as a reliable evaluator of God's call to fellowship, because I am listening for God's call in a way that makes me readily *creative* rather than just receptive. This line of objection seems natural, but it's too quick to succeed or even to threaten. Willingness to submit to God's will doesn't entail willingness, or any other tendency, to *fabricate evidence* of God's reality in the absence of such evidence. We have no basis for merging, or even correlating, these two separate phenomena.

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. This, however, wouldn't lead me to fabricate (evidence of) the taste if instead I tasted something else that I didn't like, such as sweet milk chocolate (say, with just 30% cocoa). Returning to evidence of God's reality, we can see that the skeptics in question would need to argue that willingness to submit to God's will 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 that skeptics will discharge it. In addition, the suggestion of fabrication has no real cogency. Religious frauds are typically *unwilling* to submit to a perfectly loving God's will. They characteristically put themselves first, and their god (of health, wealth, fame, or worldly power, for instance) becomes just a means to their own selfish ends. It doesn't take much discernment to identify a religious fraud, and we have plenty of opportunities.

Some skeptics about God's reality share Thomas Nagel's worry that the existence of God would pose a serious "cosmic authority problem" for us. They, like Nagel, thus hope that God doesn't exist. As 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). This strikingly bold attitude misses the tragedy of the desired situation, the tragedy of a missed opportunity of a *lastingly* good life supported by a perfectly loving God. Something has gone wrong here, and some people don't even notice this tragedy. We face yet another blind spot in this connection. Perhaps wayward volitional leanings have blocked good cognitive judgment. I submit that they have, in fact.

It would be a pathetic, demonstrably false God who *didn't* pose a cosmic authority problem for us humans. Part of the status of being *God*, after all, would be that God has unique, perfect authority over the created world,

including humans. If God aimed to redeem humans via reconciliation, God would need to try to correct our selfish ways. So, God would need to exercise noncoercive corrective authority for our own good. Fear of God's existence seems widespread among humans, and seems to arise from our human fear of losing our own supposed authority over our lives. A philosopher might think of this as fear of losing "autonomy," whatever that slippery term connotes. Such fear, by way of antidote, could use a perfectly authoritative, corrective word from God. Still, the person embracing such fear may rebuff any corrective word, choosing death instead. Tragically, one can consistently choose death here, including whatever "autonomy" goes with it. The opposing evidence or arguments against choosing death may get no real foothold in a person's life, given human willfulness. Some philosophers may wish otherwise, but evidence and arguments won't always save the day or even the person at the end of the day.

God must ultimately provide the purposively available authoritative evidence of God's reality, and that's a good thing. The big question now is this: are skeptics willing to receive such purposively available evidence? In any case, we have found no easily generalizable support for skepticism about the reality of God. Even *if* a person were to lack conclusive evidence for God's reality, this person would have no ready way to generalize to the truth of skepticism about God *for people in general*. Salient undefeated evidence of God's reality possessed by nonskeptics wouldn't be challenged at all by there being an individual (or even a group) lacking such evidence (as long as the evidence is purposively available to the latter). More specifically, the fact that one person lacks a religious experience doesn't challenge (the veracity of) the religious experience *had by others*. It seems just desperate or cognitively confused to suggest otherwise, and this would signal cognitive weakness that hinders good judgment.

We should always ask *why* a skeptical person lacks evidence of God's reality, in a manner that allows for a cognitive shortcoming in the skeptic. Specifically, we should ask whether that person is genuinely open to receiving purposively available authoritative evidence and volitional knowledge regarding divine reality. If the person isn't genuinely open, we should question whether the person is in a good cognitive position to recommend skepticism about God's reality. If the person is open to receiving perfectly authoritative evidence, we should wait to see if his days as a skeptic are numbered. In either case, skepticism about God's reality poses no general or immediate threat for all concerned.

Proponents of skepticism now owe us an undefeated defeater of purposively available authoritative evidence of divine reality. We are, in any case, no longer playing a spectator sport, since we are ourselves candidates for divine

judgment, and this bears directly on the divine evidence we should expect. Skeptics will doubtless look for a defeater in the fact of the elusiveness of evidence of divine reality, and thus the topic of divine hiddenness emerges now. In connection with this topic, then, we turn to cognitive idolatry and its needed antidote: knowledge of divine reality as *volitional attunement* to divine reality. We'll find in this antidote a new conclusive argument for divine reality, at least for those with eyes to see and ears to hear.