

# HIDDENNESS, EVIDENCE, AND IDOLATRY

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## 1. Introduction

In some of the most important recent work in religious epistemology, Paul Moser (2002, 2004, 2008) develops a multifaceted reply to a prominent attack on belief in God—what we’ll call the **Hiddenness Argument**. This paper raises a number of worries about Moser’s novel treatment of the Hiddenness Argument. After laying out the version of that argument Moser most explicitly engages, we explain the four main elements of Moser’s reply and argue that it stands or falls with two pieces in particular—what we call the **Purposively Available Evidence Argument** and the **Cognitive Idolatry Argument**. We then show that the Cognitive Idolatry Argument fails, leaving the Purposively Available Evidence Argument as Moser’s only potentially viable objection to the Hiddenness Argument. We conclude that Moser’s treatment of the Hiddenness Argument depends crucially on some controversial epistemological claims about certain of our moral beliefs, and is thus considerably more vulnerable than many have recognized.

## 2. The Hiddenness Argument and Moser’s Multifaceted Reply

### *a. The Hiddenness Argument*

In the following passages, Moser articulates the version of the Hiddenness Argument he means to engage:

How could a perfectly loving God, who reportedly aims to communicate with people, *fail* to be manifested in such a way that removes all reasonable human doubt about God’s reality? Many people, including many philosophers, deny that this is possible.

[...] We might have thought, at least initially, that a perfectly loving God's existence, if real, would be beyond reasonable doubt for all cognitively normal adult humans. God's existence, however, is not beyond reasonable doubt according to many cognitively normal adult humans. So, according to these people, we may reasonably deny that God exists or at least reasonably refrain from believing that God exists. (2008: 106)

Some philosophers... have objected that God's alleged self-revelation is too unclear, at best, to merit reasonable acknowledgement. Surely, their objection goes, God would owe us more miraculous signs and wonders, whatever God's redemptive aims. Why doesn't God entertain us, once and for all, with a *decisive* revelation of God's awesome power? After all, it wouldn't cost God anything, and it may vanquish nagging doubts about God's reality. As a result, we're told, a truly loving God would surely use strikingly miraculous self-revelation to free us from our doubts. This, however, hasn't happened. God's redemptive purposes, many people will thus object, wouldn't exonerate God from the charge of excess restraint in self-revelation. (2008: 128)

It'll be helpful to have a more formal statement of the Hiddenness Argument on hand. Letting **spectator evidence** mean evidence for God's existence you can acquire without thereby being called by God to submit to a morally transformative relationship with him (cf. 2008: 2), here's the statement of the Hiddenness Argument we'll start with:

### **The Hiddenness Argument**

1. If God existed, then every cognitively normal adult human would be (epistemically) justified in believing that God exists.
2. A cognitively normal adult human would be justified in believing that God exists only if she had adequate spectator evidence that God exists.
3. So: If God existed, every cognitively normal adult human would have adequate spectator evidence that God exists.

4. Some cognitively normal adult humans lack adequate spectator evidence that God exists.

C. So: God doesn't exist.

Premise 2 suggests the general view that epistemic justification requires adequate evidence. Actually, that's controversial: there's vigorous debate in mainstream epistemology over the merits of such requirements.<sup>1</sup> The point to see here is that, given his own approach to epistemic justification, Moser will accept whatever general evidentialist assumptions lie behind the argument:

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. [...] 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. (2008: 33)

Moser will thus have to aim his attacks elsewhere than the argument's underlying evidentialism about epistemic justification.

By our count, Moser presents four main interrelated objections to the Hiddenness Argument. In the remainder of this section, we'll be arguing that one of these objections is a nonstarter, and that a different objection collapses into a third. This will leave two potentially viable objections to the Hiddenness Argument: the Purposively Available Evidence Argument and the Cognitive Idolatry Argument.

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<sup>1</sup> For recent discussion, see (e.g.) chapters 3 and 5 of Bergmann (2006).

*b. Against 2: The Spirit of God Argument*

What we'll call the **Spirit of God Argument** targets premise 2. Moser presses this objection in the following passage:

[T]he intervening personal Spirit of God would be the best source, including the most direct source, to confirm God's authoritative reality... Indeed, given God's being inherently personal, God's intervening personal Spirit would be the only *directly self-authenticating* source of firsthand veridical evidence of God's reality, since *the genuinely experienced presence* of God's intervening personal Spirit, via conscience, would constitute the firsthand veridical evidence in question, and only God's Spirit could provide this evidence. [...] In picking something other than God's intervening Spirit as the direct source for veridically confirming God's reality, we could always plausibly ask this: what is the cognitively reliable relation between *that other thing* and *God's reality*? This question will leave a vast opening to doubt, even in a cognitively serious manner, the authenticity of the supposed veridical witness to God's reality. So, with unsurpassable authority and in agreement with God's character of perfect love, God's intervening Spirit directly witnesses to, and thus confirms, God's reality *directly* for willingly receptive people at God's chosen time. In thus witnessing with personal intervention in human conscience, the personal source of divine veridical personal evidence becomes the veridical evidence itself. This kind of *cognitive inspiration* yields firsthand foundational (that is, noninferential) evidence and knowledge of God's reality. (2008: 149-50)

A close inspection of this argument will reveal that whatever apparent power it enjoys stems from a "de dicto / de re" confusion. Letting **God's Spirit** mean "the irreducibly personal power behind volitional transformation of humans toward God's moral character" (2008: 144), we restate Moser's argument as follows:

### The Spirit of God Argument

1. You (a cognitively normal adult human, let's suppose) couldn't doubt whether there's a "cognitively reliable relation" between your experiencing (via conscience) the presence of God's Spirit and [God exists].<sup>2</sup>
  2. For anything *other* than your experience of the presence of God's Spirit, you could doubt whether there's a cognitively reliable relation between it and [God exists].
  3. So: Your experiencing the presence of God's Spirit would be the best kind of evidence for God's existence.
  4. If your experience of the presence of God's Spirit would be the best kind of evidence for God's existence, then a cognitively normal adult human could have adequate ("belief-justifying") evidence for God's existence that's not spectator evidence.<sup>3</sup>
- C. So: A cognitively normal adult human could be justified in believing that God exists absent adequate spectator evidence for God's existence.

We begin by noting that there are de dicto and de re readings of 1 and 2. On the de dicto reading, 1 seems clearly true but 2 is clearly false. On this reading, 1 amounts to this:

- You couldn't doubt whether there's a cognitively reliable relation between [You experience the presence of God's Spirit] and [God exists].

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<sup>2</sup> Here and elsewhere, '[P]' abbreviates 'the proposition that P'.

<sup>3</sup> We're granting Moser's claim that "[o]ur willingly experiencing God's intervening personal Spirit, as a foundation of firsthand knowledge of God's reality, figures centrally in an ongoing struggle between our destructively selfish wills and the life-giving will of a perfectly loving God" (2008: 152). If that's right, then (presumably) an experienced presence of God's Spirit wouldn't be spectator evidence (i.e., evidence for God's existence you can acquire without being called to a morally transformative relationship with God).

Since [You experience the presence of God's Spirit] clearly entails [God exists], this de dicto reading of 1 is quite plausible. But the same can't be said for the de dicto reading of 2:

- For anything *other* than [You experience the presence of God's Spirit], you could doubt whether there's a cognitively reliable relation between it and [God exists].

Consider any clearly valid argument for God's existence that doesn't employ [You experience the presence of God's Spirit]. Since such an argument's premises clearly entail [God exists], you couldn't doubt whether there's a cognitively reliable relation between those premises and [God exists]. So the premises of any clearly valid argument for God's existence (that doesn't employ [You experience the presence of God's Spirit]) would seem to be a counterexample to the de dicto reading of 2.

Unfortunately, the de re reading is no more promising, for it fails at the first step:

- You couldn't doubt of what's in fact an experienced (via conscience) presence of God's Spirit that there's a cognitively reliable relation between it and [God exists].

Even if we often do experience the presence of God's Spirit via conscience, a cognitively normal adult human could quite easily doubt whether what's in fact such an experience really is such an experience. Such a thinker could thus doubt whether there's a cognitively reliable relation between that experience and [God exists]. Since both available readings of the Spirit of God Argument involve at least one dubious premise, that argument doesn't successfully rebut its target—premise 2 of the Hiddenness Argument. We submit that the Hiddenness Argument emerges unscathed from this attack.

*b. Against 2: The Transformative Gift Argument*

According to Moser (2008, §2.8), it's possible that a cognitively normal adult human, S, justifiedly infer that God exists from propositions like these:

**P1.** I (= S) am willingly taking part in a process of conviction, forgiveness, and transformation by God (in Moser's [134-5] shorthand: "I (= S) have received the transformative gift").

**P2.** If I (= S) am willingly taking part in such a process, then God exists.

Now, if S can justifiedly infer God's existence from P1 and P2, then S's beliefs in P1 and P2—plus the "justifiers" of those beliefs—constitute adequate evidence that God exists. But such adequate evidence wouldn't be spectator evidence for God's existence. Presumably, S holds justified beliefs in P1 and P2 only if S has been called by God to submit to a morally transformative relationship with him. So premise 2 of the Hiddenness Argument is false: A cognitively normal adult human could justifiedly believe that God exists absent adequate spectator evidence for God's existence. We'll call this the **Transformative Gift Argument**.

Taken by itself, this objection turns out to be dialectically deficient. Absent additional argumentation, it's an unsatisfactory reply to premise 2 of the Hiddenness Argument. But the problem lies elsewhere than you might initially think.

You might initially think that beliefs in P1 and P2, *even if* justified, couldn't yield a justified belief that God exists: P1 so obviously entails God's existence, after all. Well, what's true is this. In a context where God's existence is in question, it would of course be dialectically inappropriate to present something like P1 in support of God's existence. But as many epistemologists have recently

argued,<sup>4</sup> the fact that it would be dialectically improper across a wide range of contexts to offer (e.g.) P1 and P2 on behalf of God’s existence is perfectly compatible with your holding beliefs in those propositions that justify your belief that God exists. More generally, something can justify you in believing P without being such that you could employ it in a dialectically proper argument for P. So the dialectical deficiency we detect here isn’t just Moser’s suggestion that, in principle, beliefs in P1 and P2 could justify you in believing that God exists.

Nevertheless, when isolated from other argumentation, this objection to premise 2 of the Hiddenness Argument *is* dialectically deficient. For as Moser makes clear (2008: 138), his claim that P1 could be justified for you depends on the thought that you could have adequate nonspectator—or, as he often puts it, **purposively available**—evidence to believe P1:

In keeping with perfectly authoritative firsthand evidence of divine reality, as opposed to spectator evidence, premise [P1] above is irreducibly first-person, self-implicating, and self-involving. It rests on undefeated authoritative evidence of divine reality that is inherently and directly firsthand and purposively available... In particular, the evidence involves my evident willing reception of an authoritative call in conscience to volitional fellowship with the One worthy of worship.

Moser here invokes adequate *nonspectator* evidence for God’s existence—constituted in part by an experienced “will-challenging” call from God—to support his claim that a thinker could be justified in believing P1 above. A key premise of the Transformative Gift Argument thus depends on the claim that there can be adequate (“belief-justifying”) nonspectator evidence for God’s existence.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Bergmann (2004), Pryor (2004), Markie (2005), Hazlett (2006), and White (2006).

<sup>5</sup> It *almost* goes without saying that the Transformative Gift Argument must include the claim that you could *justifiedly* believe (something like) P1: A justified belief in P2 plus an *unjustified* belief in P1 wouldn’t qualify as adequate evidence that God exists. But, as Moser seems to recognize (2008: 138), any justified belief in P1 will depend for its justification



So, when construed as a freestanding objection to premise 2 of the Hiddenness Argument (which implies, recall, that there *can't* be adequate nonspectator evidence for God's existence), the Transformative Gift Argument is dialectically improper.

Let's turn, then, to where the real action is: Moser's novel argument for the possibility of adequate nonspectator (or, purposively available) evidence for God's existence.

*c. Against 2: The Purposively Available Evidence Argument*

What we call the Purposively Available Evidence Argument aims to establish surprising substantive requirements on adequate evidence for God's existence by way of reflection on certain of God's central attributes. (In this way, Moser's distinctive theistic evidentialism is rooted firmly in theistic metaphysics.) Here's a helpful summary statement of his argument:

Conclusive evidence of God's existence would be purposively available to humans, given God's purpose to engage humans in terms of what they truly need and thus to avoid trivializing (evidence of) divine reality as a matter of causal human speculation. The relevant evidence of God's existence would thus be available to humans in keeping with God's vital purpose in making it available, and this purpose would reflect God's morally perfect character. In particular, God would have a significant, morally relevant purpose regarding how humans are to receive the evidence, and this purpose would set requirements for human reception of the evidence. A central divine purpose, characteristic of a perfectly loving God, would aim noncoercively but authoritatively to transform human purposes to agree with divine purposes, including a goal of divine-human fellowship in perfect love. God would aim, accordingly, to have us willingly attend to the relevant evidence in such a way that it would emerge saliently for what it is intended to be: an evident authoritative call to volitional fellowship with God. (2008: 23)

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on adequate nonspectator evidence. Hence our charge in the main text: The claim that a person could justifiably believe P1 presupposes there could be adequate nonspectator evidence that God exists.

Because we'll soon revise it in light of objections, it'll be useful to put Moser's argument somewhat more formally here:

### **The Purposively Available Evidence Argument**

1. If God existed, then one of his main aims for you would be that you freely submit to a morally transformative relationship with him.
  2. If one of God's main aims for you were that you freely submit to such a relationship with him, then your having adequate evidence for his existence would involve your receiving "an evident authoritative call to volitional fellowship with God"—where such a call "would include intended conviction of [your] waywardness and noncoercive nudging of [your] will toward divine-human fellowship in perfect love" (2008: 136).
  3. If your having adequate evidence for God's existence involved your receiving "an evident authoritative call to volitional fellowship with God," then you would have adequate nonspectator (purposively available) evidence that God exists.
- C.** So: If God existed, then your having adequate evidence for God's existence would involve your having adequate nonspectator evidence that God exists.

The Hiddenness Argument's proponent has supposed (at her second premise) that *even if* God existed, every cognitively normal adult human justified in believing God exists would need to have adequate spectator evidence that God exists. But if the above argument succeeds, any such thinker justified in such belief would have adequate nonspectator evidence for God's existence. And if that's right, then the aforementioned key supposition of the Hiddenness Argument is doubtful. For it's doubtful that, if God existed, *every* thinker justified in believing God exists would need to have *two different kinds* of adequate evidence for God's existence.

While we do think that a revised version of Moser's Purposively Available Evidence Argument may well threaten the Hiddenness Argument, we're convinced that the above version doesn't. For there are counterexamples to its second premise, ones that even Moser himself should accept. To see this, consider the following plausible things Moser has to say about testimonial evidence for, and testimonial justification and knowledge of, theistic belief (2008: 151):

The second-best kind of veridical evidence [of God's reality], after firsthand acquaintance with God's intervening personal Spirit, comes from firsthand acquaintance with people transparently in volitional fellowship with, and thus led by, God's intervening Spirit. They can personally, saliently, and veridically manifest the reality of God's loving character to others, even if somewhat indirectly. Thus Paul writes: "...thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the *knowledge of him* everywhere" (2 Cor. 2:14, RSV, italics added). [...] Paul regarded the Corinthian Christians themselves, in virtue of their volitionally transformed lives, as a "letter of recommendation" confirming the veracity of Paul's message of the reality of God's powerful redemptive love in Jesus. [...] God's intervening personal Spirit, according to Paul's pneumatic epistemology, changes a willingly receptive person's heart (or, volitional center) to make that person a living sign, even breathing and speaking evidence, of the reality of God's powerful transforming love.

Against the backdrop of these considerations, a counterexample to the second premise of Moser's Purposively Available Evidence Argument emerges.

Suppose one of Paul's Corinthian Christians, Ann, tells one of her fellow citizens, Bob, who presently lacks evidence for God's existence, some important things about God. Presumably, Ann could do this without thereby conveying to Bob "an evident authoritative call to volitional fellowship with God." Assuming this scenario could be filled out so that it meets a plausible

sufficient condition for testimonial justification, Ann’s testimony renders Bob justified in believing that God exists. Supposing now (with Moser) that some or other species of Evidentialism about epistemic justification is correct, it follows that this testimonial exchange has resulted in Bob’s gaining adequate evidence that God exists. Finally, we can suppose that one of God’s main aims for (even) Bob is that he freely submit to a morally transformative relationship with God. The upshot is this: *Even if* one of God’s main aims for you is that you freely submit to a morally transformative relationship with him, you might still gain adequate evidence for his existence without (yet) receiving “conviction of [your] waywardness and noncoercive nudging of [your] will toward divine-human fellowship.” As it currently stands, then, premise 2 of Moser’s Purposively Available Evidence Argument is false.

It’s worth noting that the above counterexample can be developed in a slightly different way that some might find more persuasive. Moving a little more slowly and cautiously, let’s suppose only that the testimonial exchange between Ann and Bob renders Bob justified in believing that Ann is herself justified in believing that God exists. Bob then combines his justified “second-order” belief about Ann with (i) a justified belief in a plausible sufficient condition for testimonial justification *and* (ii) a justified belief about the circumstances of the exchange, justifiedly concluding that *he* is now justified in believing that God exists (via Ann’s testimony). Finally, provided that having justification to believe you have justification to believe P suffices for your actually having justification to believe P,<sup>6</sup> Bob is now justified in believing that God exists—all without (yet) receiving “conviction of [his] waywardness and noncoercive nudging of [his] will toward divine-human fellowship” by God, who (still) wants (even) Bob to freely submit to a morally

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<sup>6</sup> For recent defense of this “Jp → Jp” principle, see Gibbons (2006) and White (2006). Writes White (2006: 539):

Justification is a kind of guide to the truth. We seek to form justified beliefs as a means to forming true beliefs. [...] Hence the fact that I [am] justified in believing P, counts as a reason to suppose that [P] is true... And this can constitute a justification now for believing P.

transformative relationship with him. We now have an additional counterexample to the second premise of Moser's Purposively Available Evidence Argument.

By our lights, then, the version of the Purposively Available Evidence Argument Moser most explicitly suggests fails. As we've indicated, though, there's a revised version that sidesteps the above counterexamples while still connecting with the Hiddenness Argument. To get such a version, replace the 'would' in 2's consequent with a 'might', thereby protecting 2 from the testimonial counterexamples just described. That change yields the following:

### **Revised Purposively Available Evidence Argument**

1. If God existed, then one of his main aims for you would be that you freely submit to a morally transformative relationship with him.
  2. If one of God's main aims for you were that you freely submit to such a relationship with him, then your having adequate evidence for his existence *might* involve your receiving "an evident authoritative call to volitional fellowship with God."
  3. If your having adequate evidence for God's existence involved your receiving "an evident authoritative call to volitional fellowship with God," then you would have adequate nonspectator evidence for God's existence.
- C.** So: If God existed, then your having adequate evidence for God's existence *might* involve your having adequate nonspectator evidence that God exists.

The Hiddenness Argument's proponent, recall, has supposed that *even if* God existed, every cognitively normal adult human justified in believing God exists would need to have adequate spectator evidence that God exists. But if the above argument succeeds, some such thinker justified in such belief might have adequate nonspectator evidence for God's existence. And if that's right,

then the aforementioned key supposition of the Hiddenness Argument is doubtful. For it's doubtful that, if God existed, *some* thinker justified in believing God exists would need to have *two different kinds* of adequate evidence for God's existence.

We reckon the above revised argument one of Moser's two potentially successful objections to the Hiddenness Argument. The other is what Moser calls the **Divine Purposes Reply**—which, we'll now argue, depends crucially on one of its pieces in particular, what we'll call the Cognitive Idolatry Argument.

#### *d. Against 1: The Divine Purposes Reply*

In the following passages, Moser sets out one large portion of this reply—which, unlike the preceding objections focusing on the Hiddenness Argument's second premise, attacks the first premise:

A sound approach to the problem of divine hiding includes the *Divine Purposes Reply*: God would restrain divine manifestations, at least for a time, to at least some humans in order to enhance satisfaction of God's own diverse perfectly authoritative and loving purposes regarding humans. The Divine Purposes Reply allows that the amount and kind of God's self-revelation can vary among people, even *if* there is a common minimal self-revelation purposively available on God's terms to all people. The variation in divine self-manifestation would result from God's purposes, or intentions, regarding recipients of divine revelation. If these purposes are perfectly morally righteous and loving, then God can be perfectly morally righteous and loving in giving varied self-revelation, even elusive varied self-revelation, to humans. The myth of a cognitively promiscuous, bland, uniform, predictable, or convenient God regarding divine self-manifestation should thus die easily. (2008: 110-1)

Conceivably, God hides on occasion from some people for various perfectly loving divine purposes. At least the following arise: (a) to teach people to yearn for, and thus eventually to value wholeheartedly and above all else, personal volitional fellowship with God, (b) to

strengthen grateful trust in God even when times look altogether bleak, (c) to remove human complacency toward God and God’s redemptive purposes, (d) to shatter destructively prideful human self-reliance, and (e) to prevent people who aren’t ready for fellowship with God from explicitly rejecting God. This list is by no means exhaustive; nor should we assume that an exhaustible list is available to humans. Even so, we can readily imagine that in some cases of divine hiding, some people would apprehend the ultimate emptiness of life without God’s presence, and thus heighten their attentiveness to matters regarding God. A perfectly loving God could use this consideration for the good of at least some humans. (2008: 107)

We of course agree with Moser that it would be unreasonable to judge *comprehensiveness* an adequacy constraint on this kind of reply to the Hiddenness Argument’s first premise. Nevertheless, we’ll now argue that an additional (to those listed above) element of Moser’s Divine Purposes Reply is essential to this reply. Without the indicated element—the Cognitive Idolatry Argument—the Divine Purposes Reply won’t seriously threaten the Hiddenness Argument.

Notably, we think Moser would have a hard time disabling the forthcoming argument that the Divine Purposes Reply depends crucially on the Cognitive Idolatry Argument. To motivate his own Divine Purposes Reply, Moser defends the Hiddenness Argument’s first premise from two prominent alternative objections—what he calls the **Freedom Response** and the **Proper-Motivation Response**. Essentially, the argument we’re about to present just turns Moser’s main objection to those alternative responses against the large portion of his own Divine Purposes Reply set forth in the above passages.

We begin our argument by noting that Moser draws a distinction between two different kinds of knowledge of God: (i) propositional knowledge that God exists *and* (ii) so called **filial knowledge** of God, which is “*reconciling* personal knowledge whereby we enter, if imperfectly, into a (volitional) *child-parent* relationship involving volitional fellowship with God as our perfectly loving

Father” (2008: 96). Clearly, while filial knowledge of God entails propositional knowledge that God exists, the latter doesn’t return the favor: “One can know that God exists... but hate God” (Moser 2004: 49).

The distinction between propositional and filial knowledge of God yields two different kinds of divine hiddenness, two different ways God can be hidden from a person. One way God can be hidden from you is your lacking adequate evidence that he exists—and so, your lacking propositional knowledge that he exists (assuming, with Moser for present purposes, some brand of Evidentialism about epistemic justification, and that propositional knowledge requires such justification). We’ll call this **divine epistemic hiddenness**. Passages like the following indicate that this is the kind of divine hiddenness Moser is primarily concerned with:

Let’s say that God’s existence is concealed, hidden, or *incognito* for a person at a time if and only if at that time God’s existence fails to be not only obvious but also *beyond cognitively reasonable doubt* for that person. (2008: 1)

A second way God can be hidden from us—a way that we humans often hide from each other, for various good purposes—is God’s refusing to “be servile toward us or always at our beck and call,” refusing to be “obsequious or fawning” (2008: 107-8). We’ll call this **divine relational hiddenness**.

Now the Hiddenness Argument’s first premise concerns (what we’re calling) divine *epistemic* hiddenness: The argument’s proponent there claims that God’s existence is incompatible with some cognitively normal adult human’s lacking justification to believe God exists. The large portion of Moser’s Divine Purposes Reply set out in the above quotations suggests that divine *epistemic* hiddenness is what (in part) enables God to achieve those cited goals (a)-(e). But, to turn Moser’s (2008: 110) limited defense of the Hiddenness Argument against that large portion of his own preferred reply to the argument:



The mere fact of less obscurity in God’s self-revelation wouldn’t seem to challenge contrite, humble, and passionate seeking after God. God could readily promote such seeking, with no added difficulty, in an environment of less obscure divine revelation.

We couldn’t agree more. What’s arguably true is that divine *relational* hiddenness can be an effective partial enabler of God’s achieving goals like (a)-(e) above. But—as Moser, along with everyone else, should concede—divine relational hiddenness doesn’t require divine epistemic hiddenness: You can be justified in believing God exists but not (yet) be in an “appropriate *child-parent* relationship with God” (Moser 2002: 127). So, citing goals like (a)-(e) that seem primarily to require some divine *relational* hiddenness doesn’t do much to help explain the level of divine *epistemic* hiddenness we seem to find in the world.<sup>7</sup> And the latter is what the first premise of the Hiddenness Argument focuses on. At a minimum, then, we can conclude that, absent additional argumentation, citing goals like (a)-(e) will leave the Hiddenness Argument more or less intact.

As we’ve said, though, Moser’s Divine Purposes Reply comprises another important element that hasn’t yet been put into play. This is what we call the Cognitive Idolatry Argument. In light of the worry just voiced about the portion of the Divine Purposes Reply already on the table, we submit that Moser’s reply stands or falls with the Cognitive Idolatry Argument, which the following passages helpfully summarize:

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<sup>7</sup> Readers still wondering whether divine epistemic hiddenness from humans might be an effective partial enabler of human filial knowledge of God will, we think, find it instructive to ask the parallel question about child-parent relationships among humans. Suppose you want a child of yours to grow into a *proper* child-parent relationship with you. Might relieving your child of whatever justification s/he now has to think you exist—or preventing her from gaining such justification in the first place—be an effective partial enabler of a proper child-parent relationship between the two of you? Putting it mildly, an affirmative answer is somewhat implausible. All the argument currently under construction in the main text needs is the analogous claim concerning God and humans (which, again, we think Moser will accept [2008: 110])—viz., that it’s (at best) somewhat implausible to think divine epistemic hiddenness is an effective partial enabler human filial knowledge of God (which includes satisfaction of goals like [a]-[e] that Moser cites).

In *cognitive* idolatry, we deny... God's supreme authority in commending ways of knowing God's reality. [...] Such idolatry rests on a cognitive standard, whether empiricist, deductivist, rationalist, or some hybrid, that doesn't let God be authoritative Lord over our knowing God's reality. Cognitive idolatry typically aims to protect one's lifestyle from serious challenge by the God who would authoritatively and lovingly call, judge, and seek to reconcile humans. [...] Cognitive idolatry exploits epistemological standards... to refuse to let God be supremely authoritative in a person's life, initially in the cognitive area of life. A cosmic authority problem regarding a perfectly authoritative and loving God lies behind much cognitive idolatry and, for that matter, idolatry in general. In cognitive idolatry, we seek to control the terms for knowing God's reality in a way that devalues God's preeminent authority. (2008: 102)

[Cognitive idolatry] often rests on a principle of this form: Unless God (if God exists) supplies evidence of kind *K*, God's existence is too obscure to justify reasonable acknowledgement. The problem isn't with a principle of this form but is rather with the specification of kind *K*. Some philosophers specify *K* in a way that disregards what would be the distinctive personal character and redemptive intentions of a perfectly authoritative and loving God. They thereby isolate themselves from any divine challenge of volitional attunement, and risk cognitive idolatry too. Such idolatry arises from a cognitive commitment designed... to exclude God as Lord in our lives. It stems from the human desire to be, or at least to appoint, the ultimate authority for our lives, as if we humans were entitled to this. Such idolatry would obscure for us important purposively available evidence of God's reality, by obscuring or distorting what we attend to, and would thus obscure for us the truth about God's reality. [...] Tragically, supposed mere spectators complaining from remote regions may in fact remain out in those regions by their own self-isolating choices. (2008: 122, 123; cf. 62)

Let's restate this fascinating line of objection to the Hiddenness Argument's first premise more formally:

### The Cognitive Idolatry Argument

1. Even if God existed, some cognitively normal adult humans might culpably endorse overly restrictive requirements on evidence for God's existence—requirements that aren't sensitive to "the distinctive personal character and redemptive intentions of a perfectly authoritative and loving God."
2. If you culpably endorse such requirements on evidence for God's existence, then you're thereby culpably keeping yourself from gaining available evidence for God's existence.
- C. Even if God existed, it might still be that some cognitively normal adult humans culpably lack adequate evidence that God exists (and so, aren't justified in believing God exists).

We should pause briefly to note the importance of the 'culpably' in 2's (and so, C's) consequent. Presumably, most (if not all) parties to the debate over the Hiddenness Argument will (quite correctly, we think) want to at least leave the following position open:

- There couldn't be a cognitively normal adult human who *nonculpably* lacks adequate evidence for God's existence.

Few (if any) critics of the Hiddenness Argument will try to rebut its first premise by plumping for the possibility that God exists yet some cognitively normal adult humans nevertheless nonculpably lack adequate evidence that he exists. Instead, most (if not all) of those attempting to rebut the first premise will employ the same kind of strategy Moser does in presenting the Cognitive Idolatry Argument—viz., advocate the possibility that God exists yet some cognitively normal adult humans somehow *culpably* lack adequate evidence for his existence.

It's time to draw together this section's main findings. Moser presses four interrelated objections against the Hiddenness Argument. One of these (the Spirit of God Argument) seems a nonstarter, while another (the Transformative Gift Argument) is parasitic on the Purposively Available Evidence Argument—which, together with the Divine Purposes Reply, are Moser's two potentially successful objections to the Hiddenness Argument. Further, the Divine Purposes Reply depends crucially on the Cognitive Idolatry Argument. So, if the Cognitive Idolatry Argument fails, Moser's reply to the Hiddenness Argument reduces to the Purposively Available Evidence Argument.

In the next section, we'll argue that the Cognitive Idolatry Argument does indeed fail. We'll then conclude by reflecting on Moser's reply's prospects for success, given that it arguably stands or falls with the Purposively Available Evidence Argument.

### **The Failure of the Cognitive Idolatry Argument**

We'll start with a quick-and-dirty preliminary objection to the Cognitive Idolatry Argument's second premise. After considering a likely defense of that premise, we'll develop our preliminary objection into a serious problem for the argument.

According to premise 2 of the Cognitive Idolatry Argument, you can keep yourself from acquiring available foundational evidence for God's existence simply by endorsing overly restrictive requirements on evidence for God's existence. But parallel claims concerning other kinds of foundational evidence are not very compelling. Plausibly, your current visual experience justifies you in believing there are mind-independent physical objects—even if you're an "external world skeptic" who endorses mistaken views on which such experiences don't justify such beliefs for you. Similarly, it seems you could have foundational a priori justification to believe certain propositions, even if you're an "a priori skeptic" who endorses mistaken views on which you don't have such

justification for any belief. (Supposing your skepticism about the a priori is justified by philosophical argument[s], won't at least certain of your premises be justified a priori if at all?) More generally, it seems you can't keep yourself from gaining available foundational evidence of a certain kind simply by denying that such evidence exists. You don't have *that* kind of control over *that* part of your cognitive life. Since 2 of the Cognitive Idolatry Argument counterintuitively implies you do, that argument fails.

Now we see a natural way for Moser to reply to this preliminary objection. The quotations in the last section suggest Moser thinks that endorsing overly restrictive criteria for evidence of God's existence can keep you from having such evidence. But other passages suggest a somewhat different, subtler view:

We rarely criticize or even consider idols in the *cognitive* domain, because they are too close to us and too protective of our closely held preferences. Still, they flourish in the cognitive domain with real harm to their owners. We all set up or otherwise adopt... cognitive standards for what is (reasonably) to count as real. There's no problem here in principle, but we thereby may obscure or otherwise damage our perspective on significant features of reality. For instance, if we require that available evidence of reality be *reproducible* in ways we can control, we will potentially obscure for ourselves available evidence for the reality of any being that doesn't leave such reproducible evidence. Alternatively, if we require that all available evidence of reality be *sensory*, we will exclude (*at least from our acknowledgement* [italics added]) available evidence for any being that doesn't leave sensory evidence. Our cognitive standards thus matter significantly, and may obstruct our apprehension of reality. Bad epistemology can cloud what's real. (2008: 13)

Some people have a psychological attitude-set closed or even opposed to a divine redemptive program of all-inclusive reconciliation by a gift of divine-human fellowship in unselfish love. Their attitude-set, in guiding *what they attend to and how they interpret what they attend to* [italics added], obscures or even blocks for them purposively available evidence of

the reality of God. The volitionally sensitive evidence of God’s reality is, I contend, actually available... People need, however, appropriate, God-sensitive “ears to hear and eyes to see” the available evidence aright, and this requires their willingness to receive the evidence for what it is intended to be: an evident authoritative divine call, via conscience, to repentance and divine-human fellowship. (2008: 111-2)

In contrast with the passages quoted in the last section—which focus on evidence acquisition and possession—, these suggest that what your embracing mistaken criteria for evidence that God exists prevents is your *acknowledging* or *correctly interpreting* whatever evidence for God’s existence you may have. Your endorsing overly restrictive requirements on evidence that God exists, Moser is suggesting, may keep you from *treating* or *responding to* relevant parts of your total evidence as what it really is: adequate evidence for God’s existence. Notably, much recent epistemological work in the philosophy of science discusses (often under the label ‘salience’) the plausible, widely held view that Moser seems to be invoking here—viz., that “the bearing of a given piece of evidence on a given hypothesis depends on considerations of background theory” (Kelly [2006]; seminal discussions include Collingwood [1956] and Kuhn [1962]).<sup>8</sup>

The above passages recommend a somewhat different understanding of the Cognitive Idolatry Argument from that we offered in the last section:

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<sup>8</sup> We note in passing that Moser couldn’t plausibly claim that the alleged phenomenon of cognitive idolatry is just a particular instance of the more general alleged fact that “perception is theory laden” (for influential discussion, see Hanson [1961] and Kuhn [1962]). For one thing, there’s vigorous debate over the claim that perception is theory laden (cf. Kelly [2006]). For another thing, there is (to put it mildly) serious tension between the claim that perception is theory laden and Moser’s “best available explanation” account of how perceptual experience epistemically supports “external world” beliefs (cf. Moser 2008: 85-6). Briefly: If perceptual experience is theory laden, such experience is “epistemically posterior” to beliefs about the external world, and so (plausibly) can’t justify such beliefs.

### The Revised Cognitive Idolatry Argument

1. Even if God existed, some cognitively normal adult humans might culpably endorse overly restrictive requirements on evidence for God's existence.
  2. If you culpably endorse such requirements, then you're culpably keeping yourself from treating certain of your evidence as what it really is—viz., evidence for God's existence.
  3. If you're culpably keeping yourself from treating certain of your evidence as what it really is—viz., evidence for God's existence—, then you're culpably keeping that evidence from making you justified in believing [God exists].
- C.** Even if God existed, it might still be that some cognitively normal adult humans culpably lack justification to believe that God exists.

We have two objections to the Revised Cognitive Idolatry Argument,<sup>9</sup> which we'll express in (what we think is) order of ascending strength. Our first objection is that the Hiddenness Argument can be modified so as to circumvent the Revised Cognitive Idolatry Argument without losing much (if any) of its force. Here's the modified version we have in mind:

### The Modified Hiddenness Argument

1. If God existed, then *most* cognitively normal adult humans would be justified in believing that God exists.
2. A cognitively normal adult human would be justified in believing that God exists only if she had adequate spectator evidence that God exists.

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<sup>9</sup> Incidentally, readers can verify that these objections apply (*mutatis mutandis*) to the initial version of the argument as well.

3. So: If God existed, then *most* cognitively normal adult humans would have adequate spectator evidence that God exists.

4. *Many* cognitively normal adult humans lack adequate spectator evidence that God exists.

C. So: God doesn't exist.

This argument makes two modifications to the original one. In step 1, it replaces 'every cognitively normal adult human' with 'most cognitively normal adult humans', yielding a somewhat weaker first premise. And it replaces 'some' with 'many' at step 4, yielding a somewhat stronger—but (we submit) not markedly less plausible—fourth premise.

Now to engage this Modified Hiddenness Argument, the first premise of the Revised Cognitive Idolatry Argument would have to be strengthened to

- Even if God existed, *many* cognitively normal adult humans might culpably endorse overly restrictive requirements on evidence for God's existence.

We don't find that thought very plausible. Even supposing God does exist, we doubt that many people even implicitly endorse *any* requirements on evidence for God's existence, overly restrictive or otherwise. The fact that certain key passages where Moser articulates the Cognitive Idolatry Argument are restricted to *philosophers* (cf. 2008: 122) suggests that he's at least somewhat sensitive to this worry. We suspect that culpable endorsement of overly restrictive conditions on evidence for God's existence explains only God's hiding from a small number of the more reflective among us, if such endorsement can explain any divine epistemic hiddenness at all.



But we can set aside the above objection to the Revised Cognitive Idolatry Argument; that won't deliver it from failure. The bigger problem is its third premise:

3. If you're culpably keeping yourself from treating certain of your evidence as what it really is—viz., evidence for God's existence—, then you're culpably keeping that evidence from making you justified in believing [God exists].

This claim implies that *even if* you have what's in fact adequate evidence E for proposition P, you can culpably keep E from justifying P for you *by* culpably keeping yourself from treating E as evidence for P. We think the following argument casts serious doubt on the indicated implication of 3:

#### **An Argument against Premise 3 of the Revised Cognitive Idolatry Argument**

1. If you're culpable for failing to treat E as evidence that P, then you have a choice about whether you treat E as evidence that P.<sup>10</sup>
2. If you have a choice about whether you treat E as evidence that P, then E's justifying P for you doesn't require that you treat E as evidence that P.<sup>11</sup>
3. So: If you're culpable for failing to treat E as evidence that P, then E's justifying P for you doesn't require that you treat E as evidence that P.
4. If E's justifying P for you doesn't require that you treat E as evidence that P, then failing to treat E as evidence that P won't all by itself keep E from justifying P for you.
5. So: If you're culpable for failing to treat E as evidence that P, then failing to treat E as evidence that P won't all by itself keep E from justifying P for you.

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<sup>10</sup> For recent discussion and defense of such principles (from, e.g., so called "Frankfurt-type Cases"), see Warfield (2008).

<sup>11</sup> This is the argument's shakiest step. See below for a supporting argument.

**C.** So: Even if you're culpable for failing to treat certain evidence you have as evidence that God exists, that failure isn't all by itself keeping the relevant evidence from rendering you justified in believing [God exists].

So far as we can see, 2 is the above argument's shakiest step. Fortunately, there's a strong supporting argument available for it.

Suppose (for conditional proof) that E's justifying P for you requires that you treat E as evidence that P. Suppose also (for nested reductio) that you have a choice about whether you treat E as evidence that P. It follows that you have a choice about whether your evidence E justifies P for you (at the time in question). But you *don't* have a choice about that. While you may *across time* have significant control over (e.g.) what evidence you have, you don't *at a given time* have much (if any) control over what the evidence you then have supports or justifies for you. So you don't have a choice about whether you treat E as evidence that P. The overall conclusion: If E's justifying P for you requires that you treat E as evidence that P, then you don't have a choice about whether you treat E as evidence that P. Contrapositively: If you *do* have a choice about whether you treat E as evidence that P, then E's justifying P for you *doesn't* require that you treat E as evidence that P. We've now arrived at step 2 of our second, stronger (so we think) objection to the Revised Cognitive Idolatry Argument.

### **Conclusion**

In light of the objections to the Cognitive Idolatry Argument pressed in the last section, we conclude that that argument fails. Combining this result with the main findings of the section before last serves to whittle Moser's reply to the Hiddenness Argument down to the (Revised) Purposively Available Evidence Argument. Should this be cause for concern?

Provided there aren't significant obstacles to the Purposively Available Evidence Argument's success, the fact that Moser's reply to the Hiddenness Argument stands or falls with it needn't be cause for much concern. (So what if the Hiddenness Argument's failure isn't *overdetermined*, as long as it in fact fails?) On the other hand, if significant challenges *can* be raised to the Purposively Available Evidence Argument, they'll thereby constitute significant challenges to Moser's treatment of the Hiddenness Argument. And so our final question arises: *Are there* significant obstacles to the success of the Purposively Available Evidence Argument?

Recall step 2 of (the revised version of) the argument:

**2.** If one of God's main aims for you were that you freely submit to such a relationship with him, then your having adequate evidence for his existence *might* involve your receiving "an evident authoritative call to volitional fellowship with God."

Your receiving such a call, according to Moser, would include your gaining via conscience certain experiential evidence that justifies your believing certain moral propositions about both yourself and God—where those experiences justify the relevant moral propositions in virtue of the latter qualifying as the best available explanation of the former (cf. 2008: 138-9):

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... to undertake an act of self-giving kindness or the duty... not to perform an act of needless torture. [...] One's firsthand experience of what is evidently God's authoritative call... wouldn't be an argument of any kind; nor would it be a propositional answer to skeptical questions. Instead, it would be experiential acquaintance... 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. [...] 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. (2008: 63, 65)

Moser's Purposively Available Evidence Argument thus presupposes that at least some cognitively normal adult humans are noninferentially justified in believing certain moral propositions about themselves and God in virtue of those propositions' being their best available explanation of certain "conscience" experiences they have. Any significant obstacle to the success of this position in moral epistemology would be an obstacle to the success of Moser's reply to the Hiddenness Argument (given the reply's dependence on the Purposively Available Evidence Argument). So: *Are there* significant challenges to the thought that cognitively normal adult humans have "conscience" experiences the best available explanation of which is a proposition like [I have been convicted and forgiven by God for all my wrongdoing]?

We're afraid so, and will close by briefly explaining why. We expect many readers will be aware of the growing body of literature at the intersection of moral philosophy and cognitive science strongly suggesting that experiences prompting moral beliefs are often influenced (if not generated) by personal bias (against, as well as toward, others and yourself), illusions (e.g., so called "framing effects"), culture, society, biology, and so on (see the papers collected in Sinnott-Armstrong [2008], as well as chapter 9 of Sinnott-Armstrong [2006]). This work confirms something we (cognitively normal adult humans) already had reason to believe via informal study of, and reflection on, our own and others' moral beliefs—viz., that experiences prompting moral beliefs (and so, moral beliefs themselves) are often influenced (if not generated) by a wide range of "non-truth-conducive" sources and factors. One consequence is that, for any cognitively normal adult, there will be

multiple explanations available for the “conscience” experiences Moser points to competing with propositions like [I’m being convicted and forgiven by God for all my wrongdoing]. To put it mildly, it’s quite unclear whether a moral proposition of the indicated kind will for many cognitively normal adults turn out to be the best explanation available to them for the relevant experiences. And of course, *even if* some moral proposition of the indicated kind turns out to be the best explanation available to some cognitively normal adults for certain of their “conscience” experiences, it may well turn out that the proposition has too narrow a margin of victory over available competing explanations for the relevant experiences to endow the proposition with positive epistemic status sufficient to meet the justification condition on knowledge (which, as we’ve indicated, is Moser’s concern throughout his work on this topic [cf. 2008: 2]).

We wouldn’t want to claim that the envisaged worries about the position in moral epistemology required by Moser’s Purposively Available Evidence Argument are insurmountable. We do, however, think the case against that moral epistemology arising from such worries is serious enough to merit additional careful attention. Absent such attention, Moser’s Purposively Available Evidence Argument won’t qualify as anything like a decisive objection to the Hiddenness Argument.

Our overall conclusion, then, is that Moser’s reply to the Hiddenness Argument depends crucially on some currently controversial claims in moral epistemology. For our part, we hope—and are even somewhat inclined to suspect—that recent challenges to the moral epistemology Moser requires can be overcome. The fact remains, however, that elaboration and defense of the required moral epistemology remains important unfinished business for Moser’s distinctive brand of evidentialism about theistic belief and the novel reply to the Hiddenness Argument it enables *if* tenable.

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