

Does Divine Hiding Undermine Positive Evidential Atheism?

Submitted to *Science, Religion and Culture* (9/7/2014)

Abstract: Positive Evidential Atheism is the two-part view that our available evidence sufficiently supports the belief that God does not exist and that God's non-existence is a morally good thing. Paul Moser's recent work (2013, 2014, and forthcoming) provides a case that Positive Evidential Atheism is undermined by "intentional divine elusiveness." This essay defends Positive Evidential Atheism along two lines: (1) that divine elusiveness does not defeat the positivity of the atheism on offer, and (2) that Positive Evidential Atheism is not evidentially undercut as Moser takes it to be.

1.

Consider the following collection of thoughts. The theistic arguments aren't very successful – they either beg the question or involve some fallacy (or collection of fallacies), or don't really prove what they promised to. And they don't look like they are getting any better. Moreover, the atheistic arguments all seem pretty much in good shape – there's no non-morally-horrible solution to the problem of evil, and there doesn't seem to be much room for God in what is clearly a naturalistic universe. Theistic replies are mostly rear-guard action in light of these facts – more apology for belief than apologetics. The evidence appears to overwhelmingly support the thought that God doesn't exist. On top of all of this, there's reason to believe that this is good news. God seems a cosmic bully or potentate, and His will overrides all meaning in our lives down here. Such a being might provide the universe with meaning, but in so doing, makes it all pretty pointless in itself. Especially human autonomy -- which, by hypothesis, would have to resolve itself into God's will. God's existence would be a moral tragedy, so good riddance to all that rubbish.

The constellation of views just under consideration is that of *Positive Evidential Atheism* (PEA), the two-part commitment that our overall available evidence supports belief that God does not exist and God's non-existence is a (comparatively) good thing. I, for my part, hold PEA true. A challenge to this view has been posed recently by Paul Moser (2013, 2014, and forthcoming), specifically that it is undermined by the thought that if God exists, He would be silent. Moreover, He would be particularly silent to those who espoused PEA, which explains why they think they have no evidence for God's existence. But the evidence, given the fact of hiding, is misleading. I will lay out Moser's challenge and defend PEA along two lines: (1) that PEA needn't be undercut in the fashion Moser takes it to be, and (2) be that divine hiding can be rendered as supporting the positivity thesis.

2.

We are finite creatures. We have short life spans, have limited cognitive abilities, and have pretty paltry sensory access to the world. We may know lots of things, but by no means do we know it all.

Moreover, we are fallible, and so when we think we know things, we can still be wrong. This is especially so with the big questions: What is freedom? Do we have souls? What is justice? Does God exist? These are difficult issues, evidentially tangled and ripe for our preferences one way or another to distort how we see where reasons are best. As a consequence, our fallibility and limitations demand a kind of intellectual modesty. This is especially so, many hold, with regard to the divine.

Consider, now, the following constellation of views: Even though the problem of evil seems unanswerable to us, we humans are not in a position to know that God would not allow severe evils in the world. Moreover, we do not know if God intervenes in this universe with individuals engaged in proper relationships with Him. Access to evidence of God is not a matter of looking and seeing, but a matter of searching, yearning, and then being transformed. God, in fact, wants *relationships* with us, not just our *assent* to claims of His existence. And so He hides from our view until we are ready for His presence.

This constellation of views is that of *Divine Hiddenness*. Notice that the view on offer is a tidy answer to a special version of the problem of evil occasioned by the (*prima facie*) cognitive evil of widespread disbelief in God. That is, if God exists and He wants a relationship with us for the sake of our wellbeing, and failure to believe in His existence is an impediment to that relationship, then it should not be evidentially problematic to believe that God exists. That part should be easy. But it is, and a going explanation for why this is so is that God doesn't exist¹. Divine hiddenness as a theory is a theodicy for this special version of the problem of evil. Specifically, it reconciles the fact of widespread failures of belief (a *prima facie* evil) with God's capacity and goodness. God is silent until we are ready to hear. Were He to reveal himself when we are not ready or in ways that we just happen to demand or prefer, the relationship He desires and we need would be perverted. God's ways, in short, are not our ways; to expect otherwise is nothing short of idolatry (Moser 2002: 121). Divine hiding, so the reasoning goes, is something we should positively expect of a God truly worthy of worship.

3.

Paul Moser has recently (2013, 2014, and forthcoming) argued that a special problem arises for Positive Evidential Atheism in light of the program of articulating reasons for divine hiding. The Evidential Atheist holds that “owing to the overall direction of our available evidence, we should believe God does not exist” (2013: 191). The trouble, as Moser holds it, is that in light of the theory of Divine Hiding, “our undisclosed available evidence could include salient undefeated evidence of God’s existence” (2013:198). This difficulty for the evidential atheist is that it is unclear, given the thought that God might be silent, that we have *all* the salient available evidence. So long as *available evidence* is roughly “currently undisclosed, but just around the next corner,” the full case for atheism will be “elusive” (2013:193). Given Divine Hiding, Moser reasons, we have no basis to rule out such disclosure in our available evidence, and so we cannot tell with justification that our total evidence rules out God’s existence.

The evidential circumstance stands as conflicted for the evidential atheist, because there are many who hold that God is silent and reveals Himself in a personal, non-public fashion. Moser poses the challenge as follows:

[T]he problem is in cogently asking a nonexistence claim relative to undisclosed available evidence in a particular kind of context: namely, a context where many (otherwise) reasonable and trustworthy people having experiential evidence for the opposing claim that God exists (2013:197)

The problem is particularly trenchant for the *Positive* Evidential Atheist, since the theory of Divine Hiding entails “intentional divine elusiveness.” As Moser frames the challenge:

God typically would hide God’s existence from people ill-disposed toward it, in order not to antagonize these people in a way that diminishes their ultimate receptivity to God’s character and purposes (2013:200)

As a consequence, Moser’s view predicts that evidence of God’s existence is hidden from positive atheists. They are ill-disposed to God, so “*their* lacking evidence for God’s existence is not by itself the basis of a case for atheism” (2013:200). All positive atheists should expect, consequently, that their evidence regarding God’s existence is potentially misleading, since they are precisely those for whom God’s presence will be elusive (Moser forthcoming). And so, we see, the *positivity* of Positive Evidential Atheism undercuts the *evidentiality* of the view. Positive evidential atheists, because of their attitudes about God, lack the evidential resources to be justified in holding He does not exist. Because “God would seek trust in God, not mere faith [or belief] that God exists” (2013:201), positive atheists have

comportments toward God that interfere with knowing Him at all. Moser terms this “the undermining case” against Positive Evidential Atheism.

4.

My plan is to defend PEA against Moser’s undermining case. There are two lines of defense. The first is that the positivity of PEA and the evidentiality of PEA are not logically separate – *the reasons to hold that God’s non-existence is (or would be) a good thing are reasons to hold that God does not exist*. And hiddenness strengthens that case. The second line of defense is that independent of the connection between positivity and evidence for PEA, Moser’s undercutting needn’t be correct about all versions of PEA, but only ones that might be called *always already* PEA. Those who *came to be* PEA’s (that is, most of them) aren’t legitimate targets for Moser’s challenge.

The first and most direct defense of PEA is that the reasons for positive atheism themselves are evidential reasons, too. The argument, in its broad form is very simple. Take the argument from evil. If it shows that God is morally deficient, it shows that God does not exist. This is because God is supposed to be morally perfect. The trouble with the argument from evil is that it shows that, given specific contingent *a posteriori* truths about the world (just read any newspaper!), God is complicit with abominable evils. Now, a positive atheism *might* follow from this – it’s better that there’s not an omnipotent being who lets these sorts of things happen. But that’s a pretty weak positive atheism, since it’s not really a view that it’s good that there’s no God, but that there’s no morally defective God.

Positive atheism in its stronger form is a moral objection *to the very idea of God*. Here is a rough version of the reasoning. God, if He exists, is the only object worthy of worship. Worshipping God is an all-in, complete commitment – one gives one’s life completely over to Him. All one’s meaning and value, then, comes from Him. To give oneself completely over to anyone, to have that entity determine all the values and meanings for you, is to completely give up one’s autonomy. To demand of others that they completely give up their autonomy is immoral, and to require that they do so with the very last act of their own singular volition is positively sadistic (See Rachels 1997, [REDACTED]).

Here’s another way into the positive atheistic thought. Anyone who requires or even expects others to worship them is petulant and self-important. These are moral failings even if the person might deserve this worship. Yet these failings belong to God if we’re right that He’s the entity that requires (and in fact *demand*s) worship ([REDACTED]).

One more. If God existed, he would be omniscient. If he were omniscient, His knowledge would invade our private moments. One may invade another's privacy only for clear overriding reasons, but God has none, say, for knowing what I wrote in my journal as a 12-year-old. That makes God a cosmic snoop – by necessity, mind you.

My objective here is not to defend any of these lines of thought, but to defend those who are committed to them from Moser's undercutting argument. Now, notice that all these moral cases for positive atheism yield two real conclusions. First, that if God existed, it would be a morally bad thing. Second, because God must be morally perfect (and so His existence must be a good thing), we know *a priori* that God is a morally impossible entity. So the reasons to be a positive atheist are also *a priori* reasons to be an evidential atheist. There are not logically independent commitments of PEA, but internally related views. So instead of *undercutting* the evidence for atheism, positivity contributes to the evidentiality of evidential atheism.

A follow-up point is worth making in the current state of dialectical play. Divine Hiddenness makes it even worse for theism facing the positive atheist, not better. This is because God's elusiveness and the objectives He has for the full revelation to humans is everything the positive atheists were objecting to. Consider the commitments comprising the thesis that God is silent, particularly to those who need his company the most. The moral character and will of such a god must involve "divine severity," a commitment that God must "vigorously" care for humans in such a way that God "allow human life to be severe or rigorously difficult" (Moser 2013:4). Such severity is part of the "healing medicine prescribed for human life." The reasoning is that God withholds his presence not just from those ill-disposed to it, but also from those who pursue it (Moser 2014). Otherwise, the end relationship would not be transformative, since it would not be an accomplishment, one of giving oneself as an act of "reverent, submissive transformation" modeled by Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane:

Father, not what I will, but what you will (Mark 14:36; Moser 2013:49)

Suitable faith is a form of self-sacrifice to God. The trouble is that humans fail this Gethsemane requirement all too regularly. Moser characterizes it:

In our selfishness and pride, we often prefer not to be on the yielding and corrected end toward God. / often prefer to advise God in Gethsemane: *My will be done, God, not yours* (2013:94). Humans resist God's redemptive presence because of their selfishness, pride, superficiality, and even despair (Moser 2014 and forthcoming). They hunger for God, but in their hunger cannot recognize that He will sate them and so shun Him.

Talk about blaming the victim! To say it plainly, such a god seems a moral monster, a sadist. In short, precisely the kind of entity the positive atheists were objecting to. There's severity, and then there's severity. Notice that severe coaches, teachers and parents at least communicate with those under their tutelage – demanding *more* is often transformative, but what the demands are and how to achieve them must be clear. Otherwise, it is simple sadism, and those under their judging eye have the right to be resentful. At least they know the teacher, coach and parent exist. Now imagine such severe circumstances given you without you even knowing that there is a severe judge. And we are to blame when we throw our hands up in frustration? You can't do Gethsemane unless you know to whom you're submitting and what His will is. God at least let Jesus know what was expected of him. He knocked Saul off his horse and turned him into Paul, and the angel kept pinning Jacob when he felt the need to wrestle. Positive atheists would *love* to wrestle, but no angels answer the bell.

The second defense against Moser's undercutting argument is that just because a subject is closed off to a fact *now*, it does not mean that the subject has *always* been closed off to it. Positive atheism is a view one generally *comes to*. One does not arrive in this life, fresh from the womb, despising the very idea of God. One must think one's way into that, and along the way, one is often open to God's presence. As a piece of autobiography, religious life was a live option for me for a long time. The promise of redemption and purpose was appealing, and God sounded pretty plausible. I was anything but closed off. Now, here's the thought: if God is silent until the right time, then isn't it an error to let the best and perhaps last chance slip by? If not, then God has made the perfect the enemy of the good. It may be in character for Him – he *is severe* – but it's precisely the kind of decision easily seen as morally deficient. So, back to the positivity thesis.

The reply to Moser's undercutting argument, then, is that it doesn't undercut PEA in its most widespread form. It may undercut those who never ever were open to the idea of God. But who are those atheists? Most atheists had a period wherein they may have believed, or been open to belief. If God reveals himself at the best times, then He must do so with the best He's got. Otherwise, there is a class of people who, we might say, never had a chance.

In sum, the reply to Moser's undercutting argument is that PEA is not undercut by Divine Hiding. The positivity of PEA is also evidence, and hiding can plausibly be read as a further reading for positivity. Moreover, atheists have not all been so closed off to God that no relevant evidence was ever available. For sure, this argument has not ruled out the *possibility* that there will be evidence that God exists and has reasons for being silent with so many of us for so long, but admitting this as a possibility

does not yield any undercutting for Positive Evidential Atheism, since the reasons for divine hiding are reasons that strengthen atheistic positivity.

References

- Drange, Theodore. 1993. "The Argument from Non-Belief." *Religious Studies*. 29: 417-432.
- Maitzen, Stephen. 2006. "Divine Hiddenness and the Demographics of Theism." *Religious Studies*. 42: 177-191.
- Moser, Paul. 2002. "Cognitive Idolatry and Divine Hiding." In *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*. Ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser. Cambridge University Press. 120-147.
- Moser, Paul. 2013. *The Severity of God*. Cambridge University Press.
- Moser, Paul. 2014. "The Virtue of Fellowship with God." *Religious Faith and Intellectual Virtue*. Ed. Ted O'Connor. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moser, Paul. Forthcoming. "God and Epistemic Authority." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1997. *The Last Word*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rachels, James. 1997. "God and Moral Autonomy." In *Can Ethics Provide Answers?* Rowman and Littlefield: New York. 109-123.
- Schellenberg, J.L. 1993. *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

EndNote

- ¹ For those who run this version of the problem of cognitive evil, see Schellenberg (1993), Drange (1993), Maitzen (2006), and [REDACTED]