

Does divine hiding undermine Positive Evidential Atheism?

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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 (2012, 2013, 2014, and forthcoming) provides a case that Positive Evidential Atheism is undermined by 'intentional divine elusiveness'. This essay defends Positive Evidential Atheism from Moser's objection along two lines: (1) Moser's undercutting argument does not respect the fact that the positivity and evidentiality claims of Positive Evidential Atheism are logically connected, and (2) positive atheists needn't be those from whom God has hidden.

On Positive Evidential Atheism

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 our evidence is showing to be a thoroughly naturalistic universe. Theistic replies are mostly rear-guard action in light of these facts – more apology for belief than apologetics. The evidence appears overwhelmingly to support the thought that God doesn't exist. On top of all of this, there's reason to believe that the atheistic conclusion 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. That is, God's existence would not just be a big fact, it would be a morally overwhelming fact, a fact that dwarfs everything else that seemed before to be significant. This is especially

so with 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.¹ I, for my part, hold PEA true. A challenge to this view has been posed recently by Paul Moser (2012, 2013, 2014, and forthcoming), specifically that PEA 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. On Moser's view, the standing evidence for those holding PEA, given the fact of hiding, is misleading. Those committed to PEA, when presented with this possibility, must concede that the evidential component is undercut. 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, since the positivity thesis is logically connected to the evidentiality thesis. Further, divine hiding can be rendered as supporting the positivity thesis, which in turn supports the evidential thesis. And (2) PEA needn't be evidentially closed off to divine evidence in the way Moser takes it to be. So God doesn't *have to* be intentionally hidden from those who are positive atheists. What follows, then, is a defence of PEA against Moser's undercutting argument.

On divine hiding

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. Let us call this outlook *intellectual modesty*.

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. These are all things that those who are intellectually modest should concede. Further, given revealed traditions about God and His nature, 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*. It is a dovetailing of the thoughts behind intellectual modesty and our inclination to think that God should be an object of devotion. Notice further 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 non- and dis-belief in God. That is, if God exists and He wants a relationship with us for the sake of our well-being, 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 evidentially problematic to believe that God exists, and a going explanation for why the evidential situation is so bad for belief in God is that God doesn't exist.² Divine hiddenness as a theory is, then, 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 that He desires, and that we need, would be perverted. God's ways, in short, are not our ways; to expect otherwise is nothing short of idolatry.³ Divine hiding, so the reasoning goes, is something we should positively expect of a God truly worthy of worship.

Divine hiding undercuts PEA?

Paul Moser has recently (2012, 2013, 2014, and forthcoming) argued that a special problem arises for PEA in light of the programme 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' (Moser (2013), 191). The trouble, as Moser holds, is that in light of the theory of divine hiding, 'our *undisclosed* available evidence could include salient undefeated evidence of God's existence' (*ibid.*, 198; emphasis added). 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' (*ibid.*, 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 justifying a nonexistence claim relative to undisclosed available evidence in a particular kind of context: namely, a context where many (otherwise) reasonable and trustworthy people report their having experiential evidence for the opposing claim that God exists. (*ibid.*, 197)

The problem is particularly trenchant for the *positive* evidential atheist, since the theory of divine hiding entails ‘intentional divine elusiveness’.

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. (*ibid.*, 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’ (*ibid.*). And given their attitudes toward God, they ‘cannot consistently make an appeal to the future involving evidence from a purportedly divine knower’ (Moser (2012), 92). Atheists hold that God doesn’t exist, and so hold that the evidence is sufficient not only to assess the fact of the matter, but also to have views about what the future evidence will bear. But, again, given hiddenness as a possibility, they will not be justified in these predictions. All positive atheists should expect, consequently, is 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 that on Moser’s challenge the *positivity* of PEA 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’ (Moser (2013), 201), positive atheists have comportments toward God that interfere with knowing Him at all. Moser terms this ‘the undermining case’ against PEA.

A Defence of PEA

My plan is to defend PEA against Moser’s undermining case. There are two lines of defence. 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 defence is that independent of the connection between positivity and evidence for PEA, Moser’s undercutting needn’t be correct about all adherents to PEA, but only ones that might be called *always already* PEAs. Those who *came to be* PEAs (that is, most of them) are not legitimate targets for Moser’s challenge.

The first and most direct defence of PEA is that the reasons for positive atheism themselves are evidential reasons, too. The argument, in its broad form, is simple and familiar, as it has important parallels with the argument from evil. The core of the argument from evil is that in showing that God is morally deficient in allowing abominable evils, it shows that God does not exist. This is because God is supposed to be morally perfect, so a morally objectionable (or even less than perfect) God isn’t God. So if the result of the argument is that God is morally

objectionable, that's evidence for the non-existence claim. That's the core thought behind the argument from evil, and the same runs for the case for positive atheism. The trouble with the argument from evil is that it shows that, given specific contingent *a posteriori* truths about the world, God is complicit with abominable evils.⁴

Positive atheism, in contrast, is a moral objection *to the very idea of God*. So it is not contingent on some truths about the world, but is an *a priori* (as opposed to *a posteriori*) argument against God's existence. The following is only a rough version of the reasoning. The objective of this article isn't to make the case for PEA but to defend it from Moser's criticism. Simply, the point of this review of the arguments is to show that the positivity of PEA is not mere egoistic bravado, but reasoned rejection. This reasoned rejection then bears on the existence question in parallel fashion to the argument from evil. Consider, first, the problem of worship. 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), Aikin (2010), and Aikin & Talisse (2011)).

Here's another way into the positive atheistic thought. Those who require or even expect others to worship them are petulant and self-important. These are moral failings even if the person might deserve this worship. Consider the most saintly person you know. Now imagine her positively expecting and even getting angry with people who don't shower her with praise and adulation for her saintly ways. We would say she is saintly in one way, sociopathic in another. Yet these failings belong to God if we're right that He's the entity that requires (and in fact *demands*) worship (Aikin & Hodges (2013)).

Again, 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. From the positive atheist's perspective, 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 – namely, those suffering from not having a redemptive relationship with God. 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, by hypothesis, 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), 49). 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’ modelled by Jesus’ prayer at Gethsemane: ‘Father, not what I will, but what you will’ (Mark 14:36). 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. I often prefer to advise God in Gethsemane: *My* will be done, God, *not yours*’ (Moser (2013), 94; emphasis in original).

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 they shun Him.

To say it plainly, such a god seems a moral monster, precisely the kind of entity the positive atheists were objecting to. Notice that severe coaches, teachers, and parents at least communicate with those under their tutelage – demanding *more* is often transformative, for sure, 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. There’s severity, and then there’s severity. At least in the teacher, coach, and parent cases, the subjects under consideration know the teacher, coach, and parent exist. And the teacher, parent, and coach communicate their demands, justify their requirements, and explain to what end they are severe. Now imagine such severe circumstances given you without you even knowing that there is a severe judge, and so the judge has great expectations but neither communicates those expectations, purposes, or even her existence. 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.⁵

The second defence 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 best and perhaps last chances 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.

I expect the developmental story (or story of decline, depending on one's view) here is the case most committed to PEA. The question is what exactly it takes for God to have the attitude that He would continue to hide from these people when knowing that His continued hiding will contribute to their atheism and their consequent estrangement from Him. This is not just *allowing* someone to become an atheist, since God knows that they have incomplete evidence. Their evidence is incomplete because of His hiding. Further, the reason for hiding is presumably that these sinners fail to have sufficient deference or openness. But this failure on their part is a consequence of God's hiding. But, now, imagine that these folks are nevertheless open *to a degree* to God's love, but just not enough for God to have special revelation. That seems plausible enough. Even positive atheists had times when they weren't positive atheists, but perhaps were agnostics or seekers. They had, for them, genuine openness. Not quite as much as God would prefer, but they did have openness to a degree. Compare this thought to the story of the widow's mite – these people on their way to PEA have but a few pennies' worth of spiritual wealth and openness to God. That's all they could have.

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 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. Certainly, 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 of PEA, since the reasons for divine hiding are, again, reasons that strengthen atheistic positivity.

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Notes

1. As noted, PEA is a two-part view; however, the details comprising the two parts can vary. For instance, one may be an evidential naturalist (as noted here) and thereby be committed to evidential atheism. But naturalism isn't a necessary component, as one may be an atheist entirely on the basis of the evidential argument from evil and take no stand on naturalism. The same goes for positive atheism – one may be a positive atheist on the requirement of meaningfulness or autonomy independently. My presentation of PEA here is, one may say, an all-hands-on-deck presentation for the sake of being representative.
2. For those who present the problem of hiddenness as a reason for atheistic conclusions, see Drange (1993), Schellenberg (1993), Maitzen (2006), and Aikin (forthcoming).
3. See Moser (2002), 121 for an explicit account of what the idolatry charge here is. In essence, the challenge is that we make a false (and self-serving) image of God when we expect Him to make Himself manifest in ways we prefer. Moser terms this 'cognitive idolatry' and holds that evidence for Him needn't take the form of 'manifestational pyrotechnics'.
4. It is worth noting that the argument from evil can yield Negative Evidential Atheism. Such a view is the two-part commitment that the evidence shows that God doesn't exist and that it is lamentable that He doesn't. The problem of evil is a clear case for how such a view could be motivated: there are abominable evils, and were God to exist, there wouldn't be. The evidence shows, lamentably then, that God doesn't exist.
5. It is worth noting, finally, that these cases of Saul, Jacob, and Jesus show that there is at least a tension if not a contradiction between divine hiding and biblical religion. This is not, I think, a fully demonstrative point, especially for atheists, but if those committed to hiding and severity want to index their theories to revealed traditions, then they must address what seems from the outside like a serious problem: God doesn't hide much in the Bible, so isn't divine hiding an unbiblical view?