

How not to defend Positive Evidential Atheism

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Abstract: In ‘Undermining the case for evidential atheism’, *Religious Studies*, 48 (2012), 83–93, I challenged positive evidential atheism on the basis of some considerations from divine hiding, if God exists. Scott Aikin, in ‘Does divine hiding undermine Positive Evidential Atheism?’, *Religious Studies*, 52 (2016), 205–212, attempts to rehabilitate positive evidential atheism in the face of my challenge. I contend that his attempt fails, owing not only to his misunderstanding of my challenge from divine hiding but to also his defective positive case for atheism. The main defect is in his portrait of how evidence would count against God’s reality. I explain how a serious epistemic problem for evidential atheism persists, relative to available relevant evidence, despite Aikin’s proposed defence.

Positive Evidential Atheism

Let’s understand *Positive Evidential Atheism* as follows:

PEA: Owing to the direction of our overall available evidence, we should believe that God does not exist, while we deem it good that God does not exist.

I have contended that proponents of PEA face a serious problem in attempting to give a cogent justification of their evidential atheism, at least for all concerned (see Moser (2012)).

A serious problem comes from what would be intentional divine elusiveness if a God worthy of worship exists. Given such elusiveness, God typically would hide God’s existence from people ill-disposed toward it, in order not to alienate these people with divine presence in a way that hinders their ultimate receptivity towards God’s reality, character, and purposes. Accordingly, we should expect evidence of God’s existence typically to be hidden from advocates of PEA. So, *their* typically lacking such evidence is not by itself the basis of a case for atheism. Advocates of PEA should expect their disclosed evidence of God’s existence (in particular, its usual absence) typically to be potentially misleading as a result of

God's being purposive and selective (if God exists) in disclosing salient available evidence of God's existence. We shall consistently use the term 'typically' in this connection, because it would be implausible to ascribe a universal prohibition to God, owing to our lack of full understanding of God's purposes, if God exists.

A God who is worthy of worship and hence morally perfect would seek more than intellectual assent from humans to the proposition that God exists. In particular, such a God would seek an agreeable and cooperative human attitude towards a divine moral character worthy of worship and its corresponding will. If some people are not ready to adopt such an attitude, God reasonably and properly could hide divine evidence from them, so as not to alienate them (further) in their responses to God. Various strands of the major monotheistic traditions have acknowledged such divine elusiveness toward some humans for the sake of their benefit (see Moser (2008); *Idem* (2016); *Idem* (2017)).

The previous consideration raises a problem for any attempt to give a cogent justification of evidential atheism in conjunction with PEA. The problem ultimately concerns not a lack of overall available evidence (in the abstract), but rather an uncooperative human attitude towards God's existence that potentially interferes with God's purposively disclosing evidence for God's existence. This problem, we shall see, will bear on an attempt to justify PEA on the basis of relevant available evidence.

Aikin's defence of atheism

Scott Aikin has offered a defence of PEA in the face of the prospect of divine hiddenness (see Aikin (2016)). He begins with two considerations that misrepresent my case from divine hiddenness against PEA. He aims to reach the conclusion that 'God doesn't *have to* be intentionally hidden from those who are positive atheists' (*ibid.*, 206). Now, I have not claimed or assumed that God *must* be intentionally hidden from those who are positive atheists. I have offered instead the more modest consideration that if a God worthy of worship exists, this God *typically* would hide from people who are not ready to cooperate with God's moral character and will and who thereby would be harmed by a revelation from God. So, Aikin is opposing an implausibly strong claim that is not entailed by my case against PEA.

Aikin speaks of divine hiddenness as a 'constellation of views' that includes a kind of intellectual modesty. In particular, it allegedly includes the view that 'we do not know if God intervenes in this universe with individuals engaged in proper relationships with Him' (*ibid.*). This is not part of what I mean by 'divine hiddenness'. My understanding of divine hiddenness makes intellectual modesty a means of sensitivity to one's evidence, and it thus allows that *some* people with due modesty know that 'God intervenes in this universe with individuals engaged in proper relationships with Him'. So, once again, Aikin makes

divine hiddenness too demanding for the way I use it in challenging PEA. He thus risks setting up a straw man in the place of my actual challenge to atheism.

Aikin continues his excessive characterization of my case against PEA, as follows: ‘Moser’s view predicts that evidence of God’s existence is hidden from positive atheists’ (*ibid.*, 208). Actually, my view does not predict this. As suggested above, I have consistently used the term ‘typically’ to qualify any divine hiding from positive atheists, on the ground that we are not in a position to exclude divine revelation from positive atheists *in all cases*. We lack adequate evidence to support such an unqualified exclusion; hence my use of the term ‘typically’. Aikin ignores this important qualification, and thus goes after an implausibly strong approach to divine hiddenness, an approach less resilient than my own. Again, he risks setting up a straw man, despite the fact that he quotes my qualified claim using the term ‘typically’ (*ibid.*, top of page; cf. Moser (2012), *passim*; *Idem* (2013), 200).

My own view of God’s revelation to humans allows that God self-reveals to some positive atheists but they choose to suppress, ignore, or otherwise discredit this revelation given its inconvenience for their priorities in life. The apostle Paul suggests such a view in Romans 1:18: ‘The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth’ (NRSV). I have not said or assumed anything that denies this view. I have not claimed or assumed, then, that God hides divine evidence from all positive atheists, contrary to Aikin’s suggestion. If God offers evidence to some atheists but it is suppressed, ignored, or otherwise discredited, then my case against atheism need not assume that God hides divine evidence from all atheists. Instead, some divine evidence can be neglected by some atheists as a result of their suppressing, ignoring, or otherwise discrediting it. This alternative should not be surprising, if, as Aikin alleges, atheists should (and sometimes do) find God to be immoral and hence reject a divine requirement to make God’s will a moral priority in their lives. (We shall return to the latter allegation, in raising doubt about it.) In fact, some atheists could be suppressing or ignoring evidence of God’s reality and not even know it, given a distorted conception of God. We shall see that Aikin’s conception of God is logically distorted.

Aikin offers the following diagnosis of my case against PEA: ‘On Moser’s challenge the positivity of PEA undercuts the evidentiality of the view’ (Aikin (2016), 208). By ‘positivity of PEA’, he apparently means ‘the reasons to hold that God’s non-existence is (or would be) a good thing’ (*ibid.*). This diagnosis is misleading at best. My case finds a defeater for PEA not in the positivity of PEA (in the sense just specified) but in *the absence of relevant evidence* of God’s existence for the typical positive atheist, given either God’s hiding the relevant evidence or the positive atheists suppressing, ignoring, or otherwise discrediting the relevant evidence. In either case, the positive atheist would not have the relevant available evidence, but it would not follow that the positive atheist has adequate evidence that God does not exist. In particular, it would not follow that the positive

atheist has covered all of the available evidence where God is to be expected to be revealed and has found the evidence absent or otherwise inadequate. For instance, it would not follow that the atheist has examined all cases of religious experience, including religious experience among other humans, and found the relevant evidence to be discredited or otherwise defeated. Given such a shortcoming, the needed evidential case for PEA will be inadequate. In that case, agnosticism will arguably emerge as evidentially more stable than PEA (but I cannot digress to that topic).

Aikin proposes two lines of defence for PEA. The first line alleges that worship of God would require the abandonment of a worshipper's autonomy in a manner that makes God 'immoral' and 'sadistic' (*ibid.*, 209). Aikin adds:

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. . . . 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. (*ibid.*)

This line of defence rests on two bad inferences. One involves an alleged loss of autonomy in worship; the other involves an alleged immorality or sadism in anyone who demands worship from others. A serious problem is that Aikin gives no good reason to suppose that worship entails either the loss of autonomy in the worshipper or the demand of such a loss from an agent worshipped. One can consistently acknowledge God's authority and moral supremacy, in worship of God as adoration and full commitment, without sacrificing one's moral agency or free decision-making. In addition, God could demand such worship without asking one to relinquish one's moral agency. As a result, one could come freely to reject God's authority after worshipping God, owing to the reality of one's autonomy. Many people testify to their having done this, and Aikin gives us no reason to doubt it. So, his charge about the loss of autonomy fails to convince. It remains a mystery why he thinks worship entails the loss of autonomy.

Aikin alleges that 'those who require or even expect others to worship them are petulant and self-important', are 'moral monsters', and are guilty of 'moral failings even if the person[s] [demanding worship] might deserve this worship' (*ibid.*). This is arguably a logically inconsistent allegation. If God is deserving or 'worthy of worship' (at least as most monotheists and I use the phrase 'worthy of worship' and the title 'God'), then God would be self-sufficiently morally perfect, if God exists, and therefore would not be guilty of 'moral failings'. So, Aikin is combining two incompatible notions. In addition, a morally perfect God who demands worship from humans need not do so coercively (and hence need not extinguish human autonomy), and could properly demand worship for the moral well-being of humans as free agents. Aikin does nothing to challenge this live option, and hence his allegation fails to convince.

Aikin elaborates on his case for atheism as follows:

If God existed, it would be a morally bad thing . . . 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. (*ibid.*)

This is an unconvincing argument. Contrary to the basis of Aikin's extreme claim that 'we know *a priori* that God is a morally impossible entity', we do not know *a priori* that God's existence would be morally imperfect or a morally bad thing. At least, he has failed to give adequate evidence for this extreme claim, and I know of no one who has provided the needed evidence. If he is right, most people working in the philosophy of religion have been benighted regarding an important *a priori* truth regarding the moral impossibility or the moral imperfection of God's existence if God exists. I see no reason, however, to accept that implausible consequence of Aikin's allegation. In fact, I have pointed out that his original allegation is logically inconsistent. Aikin needs to look elsewhere, then, for a case for atheism.

Perhaps Aikin is actually after a weaker conditional claim, namely: If we have reason to believe *a priori* that God's existence would be a morally bad thing, then we have reason to believe that there is no God, because God must be morally perfect, and God's existence must be good. This weaker conditional would be above reproach, but we have no basis to affirm its antecedent. As indicated, Aikin does make this statement: '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.' Perhaps he is simply representing the position of others here, but, as suggested, he has not offered good grounds to suppose that 'we know *a priori* that God is a morally impossible entity'.

According to Aikin, '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' (*ibid.*, 210). His point is that an atheist could have been open earlier to evidence of God's reality but is now closed to such evidence. This seems right, and I have never said or assumed anything to the contrary. More to the point, my challenge to PEA does not depend on a contrary assumption.

Aikin adds an autobiographical consideration in hope of bolstering his case:

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. (*ibid.*, 211)

This consideration prompts Aikin to ask 'what exactly it takes for God to have the attitude that He would continue to hide from [atheists] when knowing that His continued hiding will contribute to their atheism and their consequent estrangement from Him'. He then proposes: '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' (*ibid.*).

It would simply beg the key question at this point to assume that the failure of all atheists or even most atheists to have sufficient openness to divine evidence 'is a consequence of God's hiding'. At least Aikin has done nothing to establish this claim. So far as his defence goes, many atheists could lack divine evidence as a result of (a) their not being sincerely open to making such evidence a priority for their lives and (b) God's not wanting to present such evidence in typical cases where it is opposed, suppressed, ignored, or otherwise discredited. (I did not, however, say 'all atheists' or 'all cases'.) If this is a live option, at least epistemically, Aikin's defence fails. As suggested, it does remain a live option, given Aikin's defence.

Perhaps Aikin actually favours a more modest position, one that refers merely to a particular (perhaps relatively narrow) class of atheists: namely, those who were for a time 'anything but closed off' to God, but who turned away from God because of God's failure to be revealed. In that case, Aikin would not be making a general claim about atheists, and his actual claim would be relatively modest in the range of people covered. Even so, I suspect that he has in mind a bolder claim. He remarks:

Most atheists had a period wherein they may have believed, or been open to belief [that God exists]. 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. (*ibid.*)

We have, however, no good reason to hold that 'most atheists had a period wherein they may have believed, or been open to belief'. At least, Aikin has not given us the needed good reason. So, his line of defence is not compelling. This result does not depend on our knowing why God hides from people in all cases or even in most cases. Given our cognitive limitations relative to God's purposes in self-revelation, we should expect incomplete knowing in that regard.

I have questioned the basis of Aikin's claim that 'most atheists had a period wherein they may have believed, or been open to belief [that God exists]' (*ibid.*). As suggested, however, my challenge to PEA does not deny this claim and need not deny it. Atheism still faces the aforementioned problem that, given our evidence, no atheist has examined all cases of religious experience among humans, and found the relevant evidence to be discredited or otherwise defeated. So, the needed evidential case for PEA will be inadequate, but it does not follow that the atheists in question 'never had a chance' (*ibid.*). Nothing in Aikin's case for atheism has ruled out God's giving them a chance to cooperate with divine evidence as a priority for their lives. So, his case fails to convince.

The fate of atheism

We have seen that PEA remains in epistemic trouble even in the face of Aikin's proposed defence of atheism. One problem is that Aikin has formulated

an excessively strong challenge to PEA that amounts to setting up a straw man, at least so far as my actual challenge goes. In particular, I have not said or assumed that God must withhold divine evidence from all or most atheists. I find nothing impossible, for instance, in God's presenting divine evidence to some, if not most, atheists and their suppressing, ignoring, or otherwise discrediting it. A second problem is that Aikin has failed to substantiate his striking claim that 'we know *a priori* that God is a morally impossible entity'. We have nothing near an adequate epistemic basis for this claim, even in Aikin's case for PEA, and Aikin's granting that God may deserve, or be worthy of, worship undermines his sweeping allegation that 'we know *a priori* that God is a morally impossible entity'. Such *a priori* knowledge would call for *a priori* knowledge that God does not merit worship, but Aikin grants that God may merit worship. (We have no reason to suppose that Aikin would, or should, opt for *a priori* knowledge of a contingent truth in this case.)

The decisive consideration now against the case for evidential atheism is that we inquirers, including atheists, have not covered all of the relevant evidential bases regarding the issue of God's reality. In particular, we have not canvassed all religious experiences among humans and found them all, or even an adequate sample of them all, to be epistemically wanting. The relevant evidence is simply too vast and complex for a quick and easy case for evidential atheism. Aikin, of course, has done nothing to remove this decisive epistemic problem in his proposed defence of PEA. As a result, we may conclude that positive evidential atheism is epistemically overdrawn, and in need of curbing and, I suggest, disowning. Until the available relevant evidence can be properly, that is, responsibly, covered, a case for positive evidential atheism will fail, on epistemic grounds. This lesson applies directly to PEA, and now, likewise, to Aikin's attempt to revive PEA. We do well, I thus suggest, to lower our hopes for PEA, on epistemic grounds, and to consider, instead, agnosticism as a more promising alternative.¹

References

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Note

1. Thanks to Mark Wynn and an anonymous referee for helpful comments.