

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## The transformative power of accepting God's love

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### Abstract

This article develops an account of some of the central features involved on the human side in adopting a richly accepting orientation towards God's love. It then builds a conceptual and empirical argument for the conclusion that accepting God's love can enhance a person's mental health and can indirectly enable a person to cultivate or maintain moral virtues – whether or not God exists. Importantly, the article contends that these transformative benefits are available to both believers and agnostics, and an original secondary data analysis is offered to support this conclusion in the case of agnostics. The article explains how this transformative value of accepting God's love may serve as the basis for a novel pragmatic argument for theistic religious commitment.

**Keywords:** virtue; pragmatic arguments; agnosticism; mental health; God's love

What is involved on the human side in the activity of accepting God's love? How might this activity of accepting or failing to accept God's love make a difference for a person's life, whether or not there is a God? Could the potential benefits of accepting God's love provide reason for a person to commit themselves to God's existence? These questions have received only scant attention from philosophers of religion, usually in narrow contexts specific to Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Yet they deserve broader exploration. They form the point of departure for this article, in which I will argue that there is a transformative value available through adopting a certain richly accepting orientation towards God's love that can serve as the basis for a pragmatic argument for committing oneself to God's existence.

I begin by briefly developing a conceptualization of the patterns of attitudes and behaviours involved in adopting a certain richly accepting orientation towards God's love. On the account that I develop, accepting God's love is something both believers and agnostics can do. I next turn to the value of accepting God's love in this sense. I focus on developing a conceptual and empirical argument for thinking that accepting God's love can help a person cultivate moral virtues, thereby becoming a better person – whether or not God exists. Importantly, I argue that this transformative value isn't only available for committed theists; it is available to agnostics as well. In fact, I present the results of an original secondary data analysis in partial defence of this specific conclusion. Finally, I indicate how this transformative value of accepting God's love can be used to generate a pragmatic argument for cognitively committing to God's existence. Roughly, agnostics have reason to cognitively commit to God's existence, despite their unbelief, in order to reap the significant benefits of moral transformation afforded by accepting God's love.

## Accepting God's love

God is often understood to be extraordinarily loving towards human persons. God intentionally and benevolently creates a world in which human persons can live and thrive, and God intentionally allows these persons to come into existence and experience any good thing they experience. God attends to the affairs of every human person, understands every human person, cares for every human person, and wills for every human person to flourish. God loves each human person with a love that goes beyond the love any other person has for them.

These ideas about God's love towards human persons are fairly minimal, and can be found (though not universally) in many of the world's specific theistic religious traditions,<sup>2</sup> as well as in philosophical work that examines theism independently of its connection to particular historical religions.<sup>3</sup> Many theists would make much stronger claims than these about God's love. But for purposes of the argument I will develop here, even these minimal claims will suffice.

My focus here is on the human activity of accepting God's love so understood. It is one thing for God to love a person in these ways, and another thing for that person to accept God's love. Instead of accepting God's love, a person could be unaware of God's love, or could ignore or reject it or misconstrue it or refuse it. Here I wish to offer an explanation of some of the chief elements involved in adopting a certain richly accepting orientation towards accepting such love from God.

At first glance, it may be tempting to think of accepting God's love as requiring that God's love exists. The language of 'acceptance' sounds factive: you can't accept something if it's not there to be accepted. While this observation may be correct about how the language of 'acceptance' is typically used, that's not how I'll be using the language here. Instead, I'll be using it to refer just to what happens on the human side in accepting God's love. Accepting God's love in this sense involves a pattern of attitudes and behaviours directed towards God as an intentional object. These attitudes and behaviours can be displayed whether or not there in fact is a God for them to be directed towards, and whether or not God loves them in the ways they take God to.

While there doesn't have to be a God in order for a human person to accept God's love in the sense I'm concerned with here, it does seem plausible that this person must at least have some sort of cognitive commitment to there being a God in order to accept God's love. The person must somehow assume, or assent, or take it to be the case that God loves them. They cannot accept God's love without being cognitively committed to God's love being there to be accepted by them. John Schellenberg has made similar claims in his defence of the argument for atheism from divine hiddenness, querying for example, 'how could you be grateful for what you have experienced as a gift of God's grace or vacillate over how to respond to your sense that God is calling you to a higher level of moral commitment or do any other thing involved in a conscious reciprocal relationship with God if you do not believe that God exists?' (Schellenberg (2017), 2). Schellenberg's answer is that you cannot.

This consideration provides us with a first ingredient for what is involved in accepting God's love. Accepting God's love involves a pattern of adopting cognitive commitments to God's having loved one in the ways in which God is traditionally conceived to love one. A person is accepting of God's love only when they tend to cognitively commit themselves to God's attending to and understanding them, God's caring for them, God's benevolently allowing each of the many good things in their life as an expression of love for them, and so on.

My own preferred approach to conceptualizing what sort of cognitive commitment may be involved here is to be fairly liberal – more liberal than the quotation from

Schellenberg would suggest. Recent philosophical work on the topic of faith has highlighted that there may be many different kinds of positive cognitive attitudes other than belief. Assuming, assenting, or accepting may be distinct cognitive attitudes weaker than belief (see, e.g., Howard-Snyder, 2013, 2019a, 2019b). I want to suggest that attitudes such as these may suffice for the sort of positive cognitive attitude required for accepting God's love (cf. Poston and Dougherty, 2007). A person who assumes that God has benevolently allowed the good things in their life, or who accepts that God has done this or assents to God's having done this, without adopting the stronger cognitive commitment of believing that God has done this, may satisfy the cognitive requirement I have in mind for accepting God's love. Thus, an agnostic – someone who neither believes that God exists nor believes that God does not exist – may be able to satisfy the cognitive requirement for accepting God's love.

While cognitive commitments to God's love are required for adopting a richly accepting orientation towards that love, I would suggest that the cognitive commitments are not all that is involved. After all, even the person who believes in God but rejects God's love may be cognitively committed to God's having allowed each of the many good things in their life as an expression of love for them, and so on. It's just that they repudiate this love from God, wish it didn't exist, long to escape from it, oppose it. There may be a sense in which they 'accept' God's love – the sense satisfied merely by their being cognitively committed to it – but there also seems to be a richer sense in which they do not 'accept' God's love. It's this richer sense of accepting or embracing God's love that is my focus here.

One of the main differences between the person who repudiates God's love and the person who embraces God's love concerns their affections. Those who reject God's love are negatively affectively oriented towards God's love for them, rather than positively affectively oriented towards it. My suggestion, then, is that a second ingredient for accepting God's love is that a person be positively affectively oriented towards this love. They must tend to experience positive emotions directed towards what they are committed to taking to be God's love for them. They will tend, for example, to be joyful about and thankful for God's bringing into their lives the many good things God does out of love for them. They will appreciate God's attentiveness to them and understanding of them. They will be glad to be cared for by God.

This isn't to say that a person can't embrace God's love while also experiencing some negative emotions related to God's love. They might appreciate God's love for them, yet feel all the more regretful of their own wrongdoing; or they might feel intimidated by the ways in which God's love might challenge them to change. Yet these negative affections seem not so much directed towards God's love itself as towards negative features of oneself or the prospects of the effects that God's love may bring about. Someone who embraces God's love in the rich way I have in mind will tend to view God's love itself as positive; and it would be a deficiency in their orientation towards that love if their affections towards God's love did not align with this positive evaluative stance.

I suggest that this positive affective orientation will also be complemented by positive desiderative and volitional orientations. The person who accepts God's love not only experiences positive emotions directed towards God's love for them, but they want God to love them, and they want to experience God's love for them. They are motivated to enjoy and acknowledge God's love for them. They try to express thanks for God's love, and to show suitable affection in return towards God in response to the love they take God to have shown them. Again, while there may be senses in which a person can 'accept' God's love that do not include such elements, a well-integrated embracing of God's love as such would include them.

What I have described in this section is a well-integrated, richly accepting orientation towards God's love. Notably, this sort of orientation towards accepting God's love comes in

degrees: a person can be more strongly disposed towards accepting God's love in this way, or more weakly disposed towards it. The orientation can also issue in particular acts of accepting particular elements of God's love. Each act of acceptance of divine love, in turn, may itself be more or less thoroughly accepting of that element of divine love, depending upon whether the relevant cognitive, affective, desiderative, and volitional elements are present with respect to that particular element of divine love.

For my purposes here, this should suffice as a sketch of what is involved in accepting God's love. I do not intend this sketch to be exhaustive: there may be more involved in accepting God's love than I have identified here. But I do intend the sketch to have highlighted several of the chief aspects involved in accepting God's love. To have an accepting orientation towards God's love is, at least, to tend to adopt a positive cognitive, affective, desiderative, and volitional orientation towards the varied aspects of divine love here highlighted. To accept particular aspects of divine love is, at least, to adopt these cognitive, affective, desiderative, and volitional features towards the relevant particular aspects of divine love. My next question concerns the value of accepting God's love in this sense.

### **The transformative power of accepting God's love**

There are many ways that accepting God's love may be valuable. For example, if a person accepts God's love, and God does love them in the ways they accept, then they respond in an appropriate, fitting way to God's love. The cognitive commitments they adopt are accurate, the affective responses they have are fitting, and the desires and volitions they have track attainable values.

Moreover, if a person accepts God's love and God does love them in the ways they accept, this may lead to further additional goods. It may secure a valuable form of relationship with God. This relationship may have implications for the person's long-term future. According to some approaches to thinking about experiencing a heavenly afterlife, for example, forming such a relationship with God is necessary for experiencing heaven and remains eternally a significant component of the experience of heaven. Relating to God in this way is thought of as the greatest good there could be for a person (Stump, 2018).

My focus here, however, will be on a value that accepting God's love may have whether or not God exists. Specifically, I will argue that accepting God's love has the particular value of being conducive to developing or retaining moral virtues.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, accepting God's love may have this value for both theists and agnostics. Accepting God's love, for both theists and agnostics, has the potential to enable moral transformation.

The main way I have in mind whereby accepting God's love can be conducive to moral virtue is indirectly, as opposed to directly. A direct approach to developing or maintaining a virtue is to practise the characteristic activities of that virtue – the characteristic behaviours, feelings, thoughts, and so on associated with that virtue (cf. Porter and Baehr, 2020). A direct approach to developing or maintaining generosity, for instance, is to practise giving things one values to benefit others with appropriate joy and thoughtfulness. Often, this direct approach to developing or maintaining virtues is emphasized in the Aristotelian tradition.

The indirect approach to virtue development I have in mind,<sup>5</sup> which can complement the direct approach, instead focuses on removing certain kinds of obstacles to a person's acting in accordance with virtue (cf. Porter and Baehr, 2020). There are many temptations that lead us away from acting in accordance with virtue. If these temptations can somehow be neutralized, their power over us reduced through the 'scaffolding' of our personalities (Snow, 2013), then this could free us to act in accordance with virtue and thereby aid us in developing virtue. For example, in the case of generosity, we might be inclined to

fear the loss of things we value, or to worry about embarrassing ourselves when we attempt to aid others with our gifts, leading us not to act generously. If our personalities can be shaped so that the influence of such fears and worries is minimized, we may thereby be better enabled to act in accordance with generosity, and so develop or maintain this virtue.

What I want to suggest here is that accepting God's love can help to neutralize these kinds of obstacles to our acting in accordance with virtue, and can thereby free us to develop or retain virtue. To see why it is reasonable to think that accepting God's love can play this role, it will be helpful to look at research on attachment, including attachment to God. This research provides strong reason to think that secure attachments to other people can play this indirect role in virtue development, and that secure attachment to God can play this role for believers. It also suggests that secure attachment to God may be able to play this role for agnostics as well. I extend this research here by reporting an original secondary data analysis focused on attachment to God among agnostics.

Attachment theory, as originally developed in psychology, was focused primarily on the child-caregiver relationship (Bowlby, 1969). According to the theory, there were three different types of attachment orientation a child might develop towards a caregiver. They might be avoidant, trying to do as much as they can on their own without relying on their caregiver, rejecting the affection of their caregiver, being cold towards them. They might be anxious, constantly seeking their caregiver's presence, distraught about their absence, unable to engage their environment without their caregiver, worried that their caregiver might abandon them. Or, they might be securely attached, a kind of happy medium in which they are confident that their caregiver will be available to them and supportive of them when needed, warm towards their caregiver, and unafraid to engage their environment on their own and to return to their caregiver when necessary. Anxious and avoidant attachment are both referred to as insecure forms of attachment, in contrast to secure attachment.

Researchers soon realized that these patterns of attachment could apply to a much wider range of relationships (Bowlby, 1973; Ainsworth, 1985), including adult romantic relationships, relationships with friends, relationships with inanimate objects, and relationships with deities (Kirkpatrick and Shaver, 1992). In these relationships, much as in the child-caregiver relationship, a person can be avoidant towards the other party in the relationship, anxious towards them, or securely attached to them. Moreover, these orientations may come in degrees.

From a theoretical perspective, it should be expected that secure attachment could indirectly support virtue development. One of the main functions of securely attached relationships is to enable a person to regulate affect (Bowlby, 1988). The child explores their environment, experiences a stressor, returns to their caregiver for support, and is better able to manage the stressful trigger and resume exploring their environment. Similarly for the adult romantic partner or friend. Securely attached relationships are a source of mental well-being and stability that enable us to confidently engage our world. The security they provide can reduce the influence of the kinds of worries and fears that tempt us away from acting in accordance with virtue. 'Attachment security', Dwiwardani et al. put it, 'provides a foundation for the practice of relational virtues' (2014, 84).

This theoretical perspective is now supported by a wealth of empirical evidence. Attachment security is very important for personal development. Secure attachment is associated with higher needs for achievement, greater likelihood of adopting mastery goals, and weaker fear of failure (Elliot and Reis, 2003). Secure attachment is related to greater curiosity (Mikulincer, 1997), greater openness to new ideas (Bourne et al., 2014), and less biased information seeking (Mikulincer, 1997). Secure attachment is

related to greater self-control (Tangney et al., 2004), greater attentiveness to one's projects (Webster et al., 2009), and better planning and organization (Learner and Kruger, 1997). All of these features are important for developing and maintaining virtues – they are precisely the sort of 'personality scaffolding' we are looking for. Studies have also confirmed more directly the link between secure attachment and virtue. For example, securely attached individuals exhibit greater empathic concern, compassion, and altruism (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2015), and they are more forgiving, grateful, and humble than their insecure counterparts (Dwiwardani et al., 2014).

Since researchers first posited that God may function as an attachment figure, evidence has mounted that secure attachment to God can function in much the same way as secure attachment to caregivers or romantic partners when it comes to features such as mental health and virtue. Secure attachment to God is associated with experiencing less negative pressure regarding body image and self-esteem (Ellison et al., 2011), and being less susceptible to problematic internet use (Knabb and Pelletier, 2013) and alcohol and drug abuse (Horton et al., 2010). Those with secure attachment to God experience greater satisfaction with life and less loneliness and depression (Kirkpatrick and Shaver, 1992; Reiner et al., 2010). The relationship between secure God attachment and virtues has also been studied more directly, with secure attachment positively linked to humility (Jankowski & Sandage, 2014; Sandage et al., 2015) and forgiveness (Davis et al., 2008).

It is important that these benefits of attachment to God appear to go beyond benefits attained from other secure attachment relationships. That is, even when controlling for other secure attachments, researchers have found that secure attachment to God still makes a significant contribution to these kinds of variables (Keefer and Brown, 2018; Njus and Sharmer, 2020). Thus, it appears that secure attachment to God can play an important and unique role in an indirect approach to virtue development.

If secure God attachment can play this role, then accepting God's love can as well. For, accepting God's love, as described in the previous section, is a large component of what researchers are measuring when they measure attachment to God. A person with a richly accepting orientation towards God's love is much more likely than their counterpart to have a secure attachment to God.

There are two widely used scales for measuring God attachment in the literature. One, a 28-item measure developed by Beck and MacDonald (2004), is more emotionally oriented. Avoidant attachment is measured using items such as 'I just don't feel a deep need to be close to God' and 'My experiences with God are very intimate and emotional' (reverse scored). Anxious attachment is measured using items such as 'I worry a lot about my relationship with God' and 'I fear God does not accept me when I do wrong'. And secure attachment is operationalized as low avoidant and low anxious attachment. The other measure is a 9-item measure developed by Rowatt and Kirkpatrick (2002), which leans more in a cognitive direction. Avoidant attachment is measured using items such as 'God seems to have little or no interest in my personal affairs' and 'I have a warm relationship with God' (reverse scored), while anxious attachment is measured using items such as 'God's reactions to me seem to be inconsistent'. Secure attachment, again, is operationalized as low anxious and low avoidant attachment.

It should be clear enough that someone who adopts the richly accepting orientation towards God's love identified in previous section would tend to respond to these items in the way a person with secure God attachment would. For example, given their tendencies to adopt positive cognitive attitudes towards God's having shown love to them in various ways, they will tend to disagree with the idea that God seems to have little or no interest in their personal affairs. Their tendencies to respond to what they take to be God's love for them with positive affect will lead them to regard their relationship with God as more warm, intimate, and emotional. And adopting a well-integrated,

accepting orientation towards God's loving them with a love that goes beyond any other person's love for them will tend to work against perceptions that God is inconsistent towards them, or fears that God does not accept them. Accordingly, this research on God attachment supports the claim that accepting God's love can play a significant role in indirect virtue development.

More carefully: this research supports, primarily, the claim that accepting God's love can play this role *for believers*. The research confirms that, at least in the case of those who believe in God, it is important for their virtue development that they accept God's love – failing to accept it by either being avoidant or anxious towards God negatively influences the believer's ability to develop or maintain moral virtues.

I say that the research primarily supports these conclusions about believers because, with few exceptions, this research has focused on the potential significance of God attachment for those who believe in God, not for those who lack belief in God. In most cases, samples collected contain few if any non-believers. In some cases, while data was collected on God attachment for non-believers, this data was purposefully excluded from the analysis by researchers. Leman et al. (2018), for example, said of their procedures that 'Given our interest in how people view God or their relationship with God, we limited the sample to participants who had high certainty about their belief in God' (*ibid.*,165).

Yet, not all researchers would agree with the idea that non-believing participants should be excluded from research on attachment to God. In their article on God attachment and eating disorders, Strenger et al. (2016) make precisely the opposite contention. They write, 'Although it may seem counter-intuitive to assess attachment to God in people who do not claim belief in a deity, previous research has demonstrated that people who do not believe in God still hold mental representations of God that affect their behaviours, emotions, and cognitions' (25). Their own analysis included both believing and non-believing participants, and they found that for the whole sample, anxious attachment to God was positively related to eating disorder symptoms. Moreover, they found that the way in which anxious attachment moderated the link between sociocultural pressure and eating disorder symptoms did not differ between believing and non-believing participants. They therefore endorse the idea that 'future research is needed to understand if/how attachment to God affects non-believers' (33).

There is also complementary research on attachment to God with Jewish populations (Pirutinsky et al., 2019) which is, at least, suggestive of the potential significance of attachment to God for those without strong cognitive commitments to God. It's not that Jews are agnostics, of course. But, rather, as emphasized by the researchers who have conducted these studies, Judaism tends in empirically verifiable ways to downplay the importance of the cognitive dimensions of religion and up-play the importance of practice. Because Judaism downplays the importance of the cognitive in this way, researchers expected that attachment to God would not be significant for Jewish participants. But they found exactly the opposite. Attachment to God was significant for anxiety and depression in their participants. In the authors' summary of their results, they write that these results appear to indicate that 'attachment to God – as opposed to belief, faith, or even conviction – may be a unique internal variable [linking] religiosity and mental health' (Pirutinsky et al. (2019), 167).

Inspired by this analysis, my suggestion here is that, just as attachment to God has proven significant for Jewish populations for whom cognitive religious commitments are less central than for other religious groups, so too perhaps attachment to God may prove significant among at least some agnostic populations. While agnostics are united in neither believing that God exists nor that God doesn't, they may differ from one another in terms of the extent to which they embrace God's love for them in the way outlined in the previous section. Some may go ahead and assume or accept that God loves them and respond

to this love in a well-integrated fashion, while others may be uninterested in whether God loves them, or may worry and waffle over whether God loves them. Such differences would be likely to lead to different attachment orientations towards God. And these differences, in turn, may have significant effects for agnostics' mental health and virtue development.

Thankfully, we can do more than rely on the suggestive studies previously mentioned. For, some of the publicly available datasets gathered to study attachment to God among believers contain large enough populations of agnostics to support statistically significant results. This data has not previously been analysed – but it is available to be analysed. Thus, I will conclude this section by briefly presenting results from a secondary analysis of one dataset containing data about attachment to God within a sizeable population of agnostics. The analysis will provide further support for the claim that maintaining a secure attachment to God – and so accepting God's love – is positively related to mental health for agnostics, and as such may contribute to indirect virtue development for agnostics.<sup>6</sup>

## God attachment among agnostics

### *Participants*

Data for this study were taken from the dataset of Study two of Njus and Sharmer's (2020) study of God attachment and mental well-being. Of the 709 participants in this study, 120 self-identified as 'agnostic'. This study focused on them.

### *Instruments and procedures*

Participants for this study completed all of the measures included in Njus and Sharmer's original survey. The focus of the present study, however, is on their responses to questions about God attachment and questions about mental health.

Participants completed Beck and MacDonald's (2004) 28-item measure of God attachment, with fourteen items used to measure avoidant attachment ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ) and fourteen items used to measure anxious attachment ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ).

Two aspects of mental health were measured in this study: depression and self-esteem. Depression was measured with the ten-item Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale Short Form (Cole et al., 2004),  $\alpha = 0.85$ . Self-esteem was measured with the widely used Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965),  $\alpha = 0.93$ .

Correlations between anxious and avoidant God attachment and depression and self-esteem were calculated. In addition, ANOVA tests were performed to determine whether there were significant differences in the mean scores for depression or self-esteem for subgroups of participants that were high or low in secure attachment to God. Part of the rationale for comparing these groups was that Njus and Sharmer's original study had found that securely attached theists had significantly higher mean scores than agnostics in self-esteem (28.57 vs 22.57) and significantly lower scores in depression (12.67 vs 20.76). The original study, however, did not assess whether secure God attachment for agnostics made a difference for this assessment.

In order to compare groups of highly secure or highly insecure participants, insecure attachment was operationalized as scoring above the sixtieth percentile in either anxious God attachment or avoidant God attachment. Secure God attachment was operationalized as scoring below the fortieth percentile in both anxious God attachment and avoidant God attachment. Groups of highly anxiously attached participants and highly avoidantly attached participants were also isolated and compared to highly secure participants.



**Table 1.** Correlations between God attachment and mental health variables for agnostics

	Self-esteem	Depression
Anxious God attachment	-0.16*	0.33**
Avoidant God attachment	-0.07	0.01

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.001$

### Results and discussion

A correlation table of the relationships between anxious and avoidant God attachment and depression and self-esteem is included in Table 1. Notably, while both avoidant and anxious attachment were negatively related to self-esteem and positively related to depression, only the relationship between anxious God attachment and depression reached a conventional level of statistical significance. The relationship between anxious attachment to God and self-esteem was near-significant. These correlations suggest that anxious God attachment is negatively related to self-esteem and positively related to depression among some agnostic populations.

ANOVA tests of the significance between group means provided evidence that it is not the mere absence of anxious God attachment that is important for agnostics. The presence of secure attachment and absence of avoidant attachment may be important as well. ANOVA tests revealed that the differences in means for depression and self-esteem between groups of securely and insecurely attached agnostics were both significant ( $p = 0.02$  in both cases). When ANOVA tests and Tukey HSD tests were conducted to compare groups of securely attached, avoidantly attached, and anxiously attached participants, the mean difference between anxiously attached and securely attached was significant ( $p = 0.01$ ) for depression, the mean differences between anxiously attached vs securely attached and between avoidantly attached vs securely attached both approached significance ( $p = 0.06$  in both cases), and the mean differences between anxiously attached and avoidantly attached groups were insignificant for both depression and self-esteem. This provides evidence for thinking that, at least among this sample of agnostics, it was not the mere absence of anxious attachment that was important for mental health, but the presence of secure attachment.

Table 2 provides group means for depression and self-esteem for four groups: securely attached theists, agnostics as a whole, securely attached agnostics, insecurely attached agnostics, avoidantly attached agnostics, and anxiously attached agnostics. As the reader can see, secure attachment roughly makes up the difference in scores for depression and self-esteem observed in Njus and Sharmar's original study between securely attached theists and agnostics – a major finding of that study. In other words, these results suggest that being securely attached to God erases the observed differences in depression and self-esteem between agnostics and securely attached theists.

These results provide support for the claim that secure attachment to God can function as a source of mental health and stability for agnostics, just as it can for theists. As such, secure attachment to God can contribute to agnostics' efforts to develop or maintain virtues indirectly. A secure attachment to God, for both agnostics and theists, can remove impediments to virtuous activity such as those associated with poor mental health, and can thereby enable them to become or remain virtuous. To put it in the preferred idiom of the article, accepting God's love can provide agnostics, and not just theists, with an indirect means for developing moral virtues.

The sample used in the research reported here is, of course, limited. It is possible that relationships observed between attachment to God and mental health in this population

**Table 2.** Mean scores for mental health for secure theists and different groups of agnostics

	Self-Esteem	Depression
Securely attached theists	28.57	12.67
Securely attached agnostics	26.86	14.86
Agnostics	22.57	20.76
Insecurely attached agnostics	21.81	23.03
Avoidantly attached agnostics	21.6	22.4
Anxiously attached agnostics	21.55	25.82

of agnostics may differ from those observed in other populations of agnostics. Agnosticism may come in many varieties, and attachment to God may not function in exactly the same way for all varieties of agnosticism. Likewise, there may be moderators that impact whether or not attachment to God influences mental health for agnostics – a point I return to in the next section. These issues should be attended to in future research. Yet the research presented here at least demonstrates that for some populations of agnostics, attachment to God can significantly impact mental health, and that is enough to support the claims of the present article that accepting God’s love can enable virtue development for agnostics and not just theists.

### **A pragmatic argument from the transformative power of accepting God’s love**

Suppose, as argued in the section entitled ‘The transformative power of accepting God’s love’, that accepting God’s love can enable a person to develop or maintain moral virtues, whether they are a theist or an agnostic. If this is true, it’s very good news. It’s good news because research suggests that most of us are not virtuous, and have a good way to go to become virtuous (see Miller, 2015). Moreover, not a lot is known about effective strategies for becoming virtuous (Miller (2017), chs 7–9). Most of us are in need of all the effective strategies for becoming more virtuous we can get, and should welcome the identification of an additional strategy.

Given the transformative potential of accepting God’s love, together with the need most of us have for moral transformation, we have the makings of a pragmatic argument for cognitively committing oneself to God. Namely, there is reason to cognitively commit oneself to God’s existence as part of an effort to accept God’s love, in order to thereby increase one’s chances of developing moral virtues and becoming a better person. I will conclude this article by indicating how a pragmatic argument of this sort might be fleshed out; but my remarks must be relatively brief.

As I am developing this argument here, I mean to address it to the agnostic. The believer is already cognitively committed to God’s existence, and so doesn’t need this argument for committing to God (though they might need an argument for accepting God’s love, which is a point that should not be forgotten!). The atheist may not be capable, psychologically, of accepting God’s love, as their disbelief in God may be in too much tension with adopting the positive cognitive commitment to God’s existence required by accepting God’s love (cf. Howard-Snyder (2013) on the tension between disbelief and faith). Moreover, I have in mind the epistemically rational agnostic: the agnostic for whom suspension of belief is an epistemically justified attitude for them to take towards God’s existence. While they reasonably suspend belief regarding God’s existence in advance of considering the pragmatic argument, it may be that the argument could

persuade them to adopt belief in God, or to adopt a weaker cognitive commitment such as assuming God exists, in order to become more accepting towards God's love and thereby potentially reap the benefits of indirect moral transformation.

The argument may be especially compelling for agnostics who do not already have several highly secure attachment relationships in their life – to mother, father, friends, etc. This suggestion receives some empirical support from research on the 'compensation hypothesis'. According to this research, individuals raised in a household with non-believing caregivers are more likely to themselves become believers if they are insecurely attached to their caregivers (Granqvist et al. (2010), 53–54). The theory is that they turn to God, at least in part, in order to make up for attachment deficits. Similarly, here the suggestion is that an agnostic may find the attachment-related advantages of accepting God's love to be especially compelling if they have been insecurely attached in important human relationships.

For agnostics who, by contrast, do already have secure attachment relationships with other human persons, the addition of a further secure attachment to God may advance their indirect development of virtues only incrementally, and so the argument here may have less appeal. Yet, it is worth recalling the point made above that there is strong evidence that, at least in the case of theists, secure attachment to God remains a significant correlate of better mental health when controlling for other secure attachments. Further research is needed to discern whether this same pattern holds for agnostics.

This pragmatic argument for religious commitment differs in important ways from some others, and avoids difficulties facing some others. It is not particularly susceptible to objections based on the idea that it motivates cognitive commitment to God on the basis of unacceptable reasons. After all, as excuses (or justifications) go, 'I did it because I wanted to be a better person' is pretty good. And this needn't be the only reason one acts on for cognitively committing to God's love. One may also do this because one hopes this love is there to accept, reasonably thinks it may well be there to accept, and thinks that accepting it if it is there would be valuable in the other ways highlighted at the beginning of the section entitled 'The transformative power of accepting God's love'. It's just that the addition of this further reason concerning conduciveness to virtue development might tip the scales for some, in an appropriate way, leading them to accept God's love when they otherwise might not have.

As with other pragmatic arguments for religious commitment, we might wonder just how someone might go about adopting the kinds of attitudes recommended by this argument, and whether their doing so would be epistemically acceptable. Yet, here if not in the case of other pragmatic arguments, there seem to be *prima facie* satisfactory responses to these questions. A key point here is that the cognitive commitments needed for accepting God's love, such as assumptions or assents, may be subject to more relaxed epistemic criteria (if any) than those that govern outright belief (cf. Jordan, 2018), and they may be more subject to volition than is belief (cf. Howard-Snyder, 2013). For instance, acting on the assumption that God has benefitted one in various ways by giving sincere thanks to God for these benefits is both within one's power and compatible with cognitive attitudes weaker than belief (cf. Byerly, forthcoming). By acting on such assumptions, one satisfies the cognitive requirement for accepting God's love and moves closer to secure God attachment.<sup>7</sup>

A more unique objection facing the present pragmatic argument has to do with the idea that it promotes treating God as a kind of 'crutch'. The criticism that religious belief acts as a kind of psychological crutch for believers has a venerable history, and is commonly associated with Freud and other advocates of wish-fulfilment explanations of religion (for a review, see Guthrie, 2006). In one of very few articles in philosophy of religion written on this topic, Angelo Juffras (1972) points a way forward for how the details of this

sort of criticism might be developed. Juffras's discussion is focused on criticisms of using 'theology' as a crutch, but much of what he has to say could be applied to using relationship with God as a crutch. In attempting to get clear on what is objectionable about using theology as a crutch, he writes, 'Presumably, the opponents of theology wish to train man to a higher state of virtue' (*ibid.*, 256). Either using theology as a crutch tends towards the development of vice, or it tends away from the development of virtue. Clarifying which virtues might be involved, Juffras writes, 'When theology is disparaged as a crutch, this also suggests what is approved, viz. self-sufficiency' (*ibid.*). Thus, one might take the objection to be that, if the agnostic accepts God's love in order to boost their mental health and thereby be in a position to become a better person, they are failing to be self-sufficient; they are succumbing to too strong a dependence on God in their pursuit of virtue.

I would suggest, however, that this criticism may be met, or at least largely blunted – for two reasons. First, recent research on the virtue of autonomy has strongly suggested that, when properly understood, autonomy should not be thought to involve a strong reluctance towards relying on others. Rather, it involves a reflective and attentive reliance upon others. This is especially clear in work on the virtue of intellectual autonomy in particular. For instance, Roberts and Wood (2007), in their discussion of the virtue of intellectual autonomy, argue that virtuous autonomy 'involves a wise dependence' on others (258). Indeed, they go so far as to suggest that the autonomous person 'sees his indebtedness [to others] as a good and fitting thing, not at all second-rate or to be regretted' (258). Similarly here we might propose that the virtue of proper autonomy does not demand that the agnostic shies away from depending on God to fulfil their needs for secure attachment, but is compatible with their accepting God's love reflectively and wisely given their understanding of themselves and the potential values that accepting God's love may hold for them.

A related point can be made by appealing to a category of virtues that Michael Brady (2018) has called 'virtues of vulnerability' (102). Brady laments the fact that, by in large, the contemporary revival of virtue theory has focused primarily on virtues of the strong – virtues operative in contexts in which a person is largely free of dependence upon others, and is often instead depended upon by others. Brady argues that, given the many ways in which human life tends to necessitate depending upon others, it can be enhanced by traits that involve depending upon others well. In accordance with such a perspective, we might see the agnostic's acceptance of divine love as reflective of a broader virtue of vulnerability that disposes them to accept others' love well, rather than as a failure of virtuous autonomy.

As with other pragmatic arguments, it might be questioned in this case whether it is relating in the recommended way towards God in particular that is necessary for securing the relevant benefits. Here, for example, one may wonder whether developing a secure attachment to another imagined figure might support the agnostic's mental health just as much as accepting God's love would. Perhaps, for instance, they could accept the Tooth Fairy's love for them, or the love of an inanimate object in their home, or the love of their ancestors.<sup>8</sup>

There are two points I think should be kept in mind in response to this sort of objection. First, we should note that, at least with respect to some candidates for alternative attachment figures, a person's evidence concerning their existence and love is likely to be significantly weaker than their evidence regarding God's existence and love. If indeed the person's evidence for these entities significantly disconfirms their existence, then they will not serve well as alternative attachment figures.

The second point is that, even if accepting love from some of these kinds of potential substitute attachment figures would in fact contribute to a person's mental health in much the way that accepting God's love would, this may not imply that accepting God's

love too is not also justified. Take the case of ancestors, for example. Perhaps some people are in an evidential position that justifies them in taking an agnostic stance towards the existence of loving ancestors. An argument that parallels the one of this article might be developed in favour of accepting love from these ancestors in this case. I would concede that such an argument may have purchase for people in this evidential situation. Yet, this needn't imply that accepting God's love is not also justified.

One consideration in favour of thinking that accepting God's love would remain justified in this case concerns the non-fungibility of lovers. It is often stressed in the literature on loving relationships that it is problematic to replace a beloved with someone else on the basis of qualities these individuals have that can be compared with one another (see Helm (2017), sect. 6). This explains why there is something objectionable (even if only defeasibly so) about trading up when one finds a potential romantic partner whose qualities exceed those of one's current romantic partner. A beloved should not so easily be substituted. The application to our case should be clear enough: one should be hesitant to treat other potential lovers, such as loving ancestors, as replacements for God just because accepting their love may be able to influence one's mental health and virtue development in much the way that accepting God's love would. God, and for that matter one's ancestors, too, should not be treated as so easily intersubstitutable.

A second consideration is that accepting God's love plausibly remains a unique case in comparison to accepting the love of other potential lovers, and it may even contribute additionally to a person's psychological health beyond what might be attainable via accepting love from potential substitute attachment figures. If God exists, nobody understands or loves you as well as God does, and nobody has done as much to support your well-being as God has. By accepting God's love, you can accept the greatest love possibly available to you. My recommendation, then, is that potential substitute attachment figures not be treated as replacements for God, but that the kind of argument given in this article may support accepting love from God as well as from some of these other attachment figures.

It hasn't been my intention here to try to neutralize any and every objection that could be brought forward against the present pragmatic argument. Rather, my aim has been more modest – to indicate how such an argument might be developed and to flag some of the important considerations that contribute to its evaluation. This discussion, I hope, is adequate to indicate the kinds of considerations that bear upon whether a pragmatic argument from the transformative value of accepting God's love might be persuasive, and for whom it might be persuasive.<sup>9</sup>

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## Notes

1. Two examples focusing on Christian sanctification are Porter and Rickabaugh (2018) and Stump (2018).
2. See, for example, Wessling (2020) on divine love in Christianity, Fakhry (2012) on divine attributes in Islam, and Frank (2009) on Jewish philosophical theology.
3. For an overview of philosophical work on divine love which shows how this work tends to make much stronger claims about divine love than those made in the text, see Graves (2014).
4. Notably, accepting God's love may be *even more conducive* towards virtue development if God does exist (cf. Porter, 2019).
5. Augustine may provide a different indirect approach (Boone, 2016).
6. I analysed a second publicly available dataset from Wave 3 of the Baylor Religion Survey that also supports this conclusion, but removed this analysis in order to preserve space.
7. See Williams et al. (2020) for experimental research on how secure God attachment can be actively cultivated.
8. Additionally, it might be asked whether accepting God's love, with the required cognitive commitments, is the only route available to agnostics for obtaining secure attachment to God. My suggestion is that there is good

reason to think this is a viable pathway, and whether there are other pathways is unclear, but it is a topic warranting additional research.

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