

Praying to stop being an atheist

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Abstract In this paper, I argue that atheists who think that the issue of God's existence or non-existence is an important one; assign a greater than negligible probability to God's existence; and are not in possession of a plausible argument for scepticism about the truth-directedness of uttering such prayers in their own cases, are under a *prima facie* epistemic obligation to pray to God that He stop them being atheists.

Keywords God · Prayer · Atheism · Theism · Agnosticism · Divine hiddenness · Epistemic obligation

At one stage, in *The God of the Philosophers*, Anthony Kenny writes as follows:

There is no reason why someone who is in doubt about the existence of God should not pray for help and guidance on this topic as in other matters. Some find something comic in the idea of an agnostic praying to a God whose existence he doubts. It is surely no more unreasonable than the act of a man adrift in the ocean, trapped in a cave, or stranded on a mountainside, who cries for help though he may never be heard or fires a signal which may never be seen.¹

In this paper, I wish to defend a thesis that is more extreme than Kenny's, viz. that prayer of a sort similar to that Kenny finds no reason for an agnostic not to engage in is in fact obligatory for some atheists.² Indeed, I wish to suggest that atheists who think

¹ Kenny (1979, p. 129). He says something almost verbatim the same in Kenny (2005, p. 20).

² I have defended this thesis very briefly before, in Mawson (2005, chap. 10 and conclusion). However, my attempt to do so has not met with universal acclaim: in a recent book on the Philosophy of Religion, the authors are generous enough to find time to quote a few of my words on the topic, but they judge sufficient to the task of dealing with them a statement of their 'hope' that their 'readers will agree that Mawson's words are beyond parody' (Clack and Clack 2008, p. 51, note).

that the issue of God's existence or non-existence is an important one; who assign anything greater than a negligible probability to God's existence; and who are not in possession of a plausible argument for scepticism about the truth-directedness of the practice of uttering such prayers in their own cases are under a *prima facie* epistemic obligation to pray to God that He stop them being atheists.³ This is only a *prima facie* obligation, defeasible in principle, as are all *prima facie* obligations, by other considerations. Nevertheless, I shall suggest that it is not defeated in practice for the majority of atheists who will read this paper and thus it emerges for them as an *ultima facie* obligation. Allow me to state the thesis more fully, by developing an analogy.

I suggest that the person who prays that God help him or her to believe in Him is as reasonable as someone who finds himself or herself shouting 'Is anyone there?' in a darkened room about which he or she has various reasonable prior beliefs. This is a room about the other occupier of which, if any, he or she has heard some controversy. Some say that in this room there is a wise old man in an ongoing relationship with whom they have found great personal satisfaction whenever they have entered the room and spoken to him. Others however claim that there is no such man, that the room only ever contains the person who goes into it. Finding himself or herself in the room today the person we are considering realizes that he or she has no other more pressing business to hand and shouts, 'Is there anyone there?'; 'If you're there wise old man, please answer me!'; and perhaps a couple of other similar things, and listens for a reply.

Such a person may be reasonable in doing this, I would maintain with Kenny, even if an 'agnostic' about the wise old man, by which I mean that he or she judges that the evidence he or she had prior to going into the room is finely balanced for and against the existence of such a man. But such a person may equally well be reasonable in shouting such things if an 'atheist' about the wise old man, by which I mean that he or she thinks that there's much more prior evidence on the side of the man not existing than there is on the side of him existing. All that has to be the case for the person going into the room to be reasonable in shouting out something like, 'Is there anyone there?'

³ To be clear at the outset, the sort of experiment that I am suggesting a certain practice of prayer may be taken to constitute is not the sort of Popper ideal of a scientific experiment that Vincent Brummer has in mind when he discusses 'Prayer and experiment: Elijah and Einstein', in his 2008, pp. 4–8, and concludes that prayer cannot be an experiment in this sense of experiment. As will become clear in the main text, the sort of prayer experiment which I endorse does not assume 'that prayer is a manipulative technique or a form of magic, that God is not a person but an object of manipulation, and that the relation between God and one who prays is not a personal relation but an impersonal manipulative one' (op. cit., p. 8). This type of prayer experiment cannot fairly be accused of being 'mercenary', of being similar to praying to God that He find one the best parking spot (an outcome which would be at the expense, albeit not culpable expense, of someone else doing so). Praying for clarity on the issue of God's existence is praying for a change within oneself, a change which will not come at the expense of anyone else, indeed is likely to benefit those with whom one interacts thereafter. It is also going to be different from praying to God that He perform a miracle—'Turn this water into wine'—which furnishes one with evidence that He exists whilst leaving one unaltered in the principles of reasoning one brings to bear in order to reach judgements based on evidence. In conducting the prayer experiment, one is open to being affected cognitively. One is not just praying, 'Please give me religious experiences', but also 'And, if needs be, please change the criteria by which I assess the evidential force of whatever experiences I have so that I am more truth-directed.' All of these features, I suggest, mitigate the fears that lie behind Brummer's aversion to thinking of prayer as potentially experimental.

is the following. The opportunity (and other) costs of doing so have to be low—the person going into the room has no other pressing business and so on—relative to the importance of the issue at stake. He or she has to believe that it is at least possible that there be in the room the wise old man in whom some people believe and that his or her shouting in this way will be taken by the man, should he exist, as a reason to reveal himself. And he or she has to fail to find more plausible than their denial any claims to the effect that, in going into the room and shouting in this way, he or she will be prone to mistake the echo of his or her own voice or some such for a reply to the question. He or she has to believe that his or her engaging in the practice of shouting out things like ‘Is anyone there?’ will be, for him or her, engaging in a ‘truth-directed’ practice; it will (at least slightly) incline him or her to the belief that there’s a man in the room if and—importantly—*only if* there is indeed such a man there. And ‘agnostics’ and ‘atheists’ about the wise old man may reasonably believe all these things as well as ‘theists’ about him.

Similarly then, I am suggesting that, as well as agnostics, those atheists who think of the issue of the existence or non-existence of God as an important one and neither assign God’s existence a vanishingly small probability, nor take themselves to have some reason to suppose that their engaging in the process of prayer would lead them to false positives, should engage, insofar as the costs (including opportunity costs; to repeat, this is only a *prima facie* obligation and there may be other obligations which trump it) are not prohibitive, in praying to God that He remove their unbelief. One reasonable prayer to utter is, ‘I believe. Help my unbelief.’⁴ Another is, ‘I don’t believe, one way or the other; help my unbelief.’ And yet another is, ‘I believe you’re not there. Help my unbelief.’ We don’t want to be like the blind man, endlessly flailing around in the dark room, trying to find the black cat that isn’t there. But if we’re in the position of the blind man in the dark room and a cat would be extremely useful to us were we to locate one, then a bit of time spent flailing around is time reasonably spent even if we think there almost certainly isn’t a cat there to be found, as long as we have no reason to think we’ll mistake anything other than a cat for a cat if we latch onto it by such flailing.

In the case of the existence of God, there is the issue of ‘Divine Hiddenness’ to be taken into account at this stage. This revolves around the claim that the mere fact that the other evidence which we have for and against the existence of God does not tip the balance more decisively than it does in favour of the existence of God is in itself an additional bit of evidence, meta-evidence if you will, that there is no God. I take it that this argument may be correctly thought of as a version of the Problem of Evil and that the most plausible version of it will present it as an evidential argument for God’s non-existence. If that is so, then even the atheist who has been convinced of its soundness in its most plausible version will accept as a possibility that he or she may be wrong in the Atheism to which he or she has been drawn thereby; he or she should judge that it remains possible that there is a God and that He has good reasons for allowing the evidence in favour of His existence to be generally as weak as the atheist takes it to be; it is just, such an atheist believes, not reasonable to think that

⁴ See *Mark* 9. 24.

this possibility is an actuality. So, unless the atheist is pushed by this (along with other arguments) to think that the probability of God's existence is negligible (of which more later), he or she is still justified in conducting the prayer experiment given that the most plausible version of Theism will have as an element that God's reasons to preserve the general level of hiddenness that he does may be countervailed by prayers of this sort.

It must be admitted however that the problem of divine hiddenness does reveal a limitation to the utility of praying in the manner that I am endorsing; it reveals, in the terms of our analogy, that the wise old man in the room, isn't, on the most plausible theories which attribute him existence, uniformly prioritizing communicating with people. That being so, any experiments which involve the evidence of his existence coming via a process which depends in part on his having a choice over whether or not to reveal himself to the experimenter cannot be conclusive experiments. In the case of God, of course, He *will* necessarily always preserve that element of choice so these 'prayers as experiments' can never be conclusive.⁵ But an inconclusive experiment may still be worth conducting when the issue to which it facilitates (inconclusive) epistemic access is sufficiently weighty relative to the low costs of carrying it out and this will still be the case for agnostics and large numbers of atheists when it comes to their uttering prayers to God to remove their Agnosticism/Atheism.⁶

It is often said that one cannot infer anything from a silence, but sometimes this is false. When one shouts into a darkened room, 'Is there anyone there?' and hears nothing by way of reply, this is in itself evidence that there's no-one there, all other things being equal. Of course, sometimes all other things are not equal. If one is playing the game of 'hide and seek' with friends in a darkened house—it being an understood rule of the game that persons hiding need do nothing to facilitate their being found—then all other things would not be equal. So the evidence provided by silence in response

⁵ This is another reason why this sort of prayer-as-experiment evades the worries that Brummer has in mind (see previous note).

⁶ It is of course true that God's hiddenness and the claim that the issue of whether or not He exists is important stand in at least *prima facie* tension with one another: were God really to have good reasons to remain as hidden as He does, then it cannot actually be that important that we reach the correct view on His existence. However, the usual way to resolve this apparent tension seems to me sufficient in this context. What is important is that we freely come to know and love Him; it is precisely this being important that explains why God starts us from a position of epistemic distance. But it is also precisely this being important which explains why God will not maintain this distance regardless of what we ask him, which gives the rationale of the experiment that I am considering. If this is so, it is simply not true that we should think that 'Praying with the tentative or provisional attitude appropriate to an experiment is self-defeating' (Brummer, *op. cit.*, p. 8). First, a tentative or provisional attitude is not always appropriate, at least in the sense of necessary, in conducting an experiment; one may have a favourite theory to which one is strongly committed, yet nevertheless experiment with a view to seeing if one can falsify it. Indeed if the favourite theory concerns a matter of importance, one may be negligent if one does *not* experiment to see if one can falsify it. This is the case, I am suggesting, with some atheists with regards to the prayer experiment. Secondly, such an attitude will not be 'self-defeating' in any sense; it could only be so, it seems to me, were it to be the case that God would only ever reveal Himself to a particular person to the extent that particular person already believed in Him (i.e., one might think, only reveal Himself when there was no point in doing so). But what reason do we have to believe this? What sort of psychology would the wise old man have to be supposed to have if he were determined to answer 'Yes' in response to the question 'Is there anyone there?' only when he knew that the person asking the question already knew the answer? Not, it seems to me, an entirely praiseworthy one.

to one asking, ‘Is there anyone there?’ is only evidence of there being no-one there on the hypothesis that any person who was there would have heard one asking the question and would have taken one’s asking it as a reason to reveal himself or herself. However, in the case of praying to God that He reveal Himself to one, it is true that if there were a God, then in His omniscience He would have heard the request and it is also true that He would take one’s asking Him to reveal Himself as a reason to do so, albeit not an overwhelming reason. Given the—putatively good—reasons for the general level of hiddenness God displays towards humanity, an individual’s merely asking God to reveal Himself, especially if done in a momentary spirit of philosophical whimsy, cannot, on the most plausible variants of Theism, be construed as in all cases giving God an overwhelming reason for Him to do so, which is why someone’s asking God to reveal Himself and receiving only silence in reply cannot be taken as a proof that God does not exist. But given that someone’s asking God to reveal Himself must on any plausible Theism give Him *some* reason to do so, so that person’s asking God to reveal Himself and receiving only silence in reply must be *some* evidence for him or her that God doesn’t exist, and increasingly strong evidence that God doesn’t exist if he or she conducts this prayer experiment earnestly and over a relatively elongated period.⁷

I now want to consider two potential objections, objections which, whilst not undermining my claim, show why it is that the obligation to experiment in prayer does not fall on all atheists and does not fall equally heavily on all on whom it does fall. The first of these we may call the ‘Fairies at the Bottom of the Garden’ objection. The second concerns the possibility of false positives.

Here then is the first objection.

Surely Mawson is confident that there are not fairies at the end of his garden, fairies being, for the sake of this argument, natural if unusual creatures who, nevertheless, have the ability to appear or disappear at will and who are generally well-disposed towards humans even if they fear them and thus incline to keep themselves out of view most of the time. However, it would not take any time or much energy for Mawson to shout down the garden each morning as he prepared his breakfast, ‘Hello fairies! If you’re out there, please reveal yourselves!’ If there were fairies at the bottom of his garden, they could perhaps be persuaded to appear by such entreaties and thus Mawson could, by performing such an experiment, confirm (at least weakly) his belief that they’re not there or of course, in principle, disconfirm it, if one of them suddenly appeared and said something like, ‘Hello, I’m Tinkerbell’. Whether or not there are fairies is quite an important issue surely, so is Mawson in the habit of shouting, ‘Hello fairies!’ each morning or does he consider himself unreasonable in restraining himself from doing so?

For the record then, I do not shout ‘Hello fairies!’ each morning and nor do I consider myself unreasonable in not doing so. How then do I square this with what I have argued so far? In two ways. First, I do not regard answering the question of whether or not there are fairies at the bottom of the garden as a task of great importance; it has

⁷ This is so unless he or she has reason to believe that he or she is a special case of a most peculiar sort, the sort where he or she not believing in God any more than he or she happens to do at the moment would be what God would wish were He to exist.

a similar importance, it strikes me, to settling the question of whether aliens with a penchant for leaving crop circles and temporarily abducting the locals are in the habit of visiting the mid-west of the U.S.A. If I were to become convinced that whether or not there were fairies at the end of the garden was an issue on which turned other issues that I *do* regard as important—that finding out whether or not there were fairies at the bottom of my garden would assist me in answering questions such as ‘Why is there anything at all?’; ‘What is the meaning of life?’; and so on, for example—then I might in fact consider myself *unreasonable* in still not shouting ‘Hello fairies’ and the like each morning. So one reason why the attempt at a *reductio* fails is due to the fact that the issue of fairies is not of comparable importance to the issue of God. There is another reason. The second reason reveals though why it is that we need to say that some atheists who allow that it is possible that God exists but assign His existence a negligible probability are also exempt from the obligation to pray to Him that He remove their Atheism.

Whilst I do not think it is impossible that there are fairies as described at the bottom of my garden, I do think it is very unlikely indeed, so unlikely that, even were the existence of fairies an important issue, the costs of my shouting ‘Hello fairies!’ would have to be very low on any individual morning for me to be even *prima facie* justified in spending that admittedly-very-small amount of energy investigating the issue and very seldom are they very low. Shouting out ‘Hello fairies’ whilst preparing breakfast would disturb my wife and perhaps neighbours, but of course there are mornings when my wife is out; my neighbours are on holiday; and so on. So there are at least some days when the costs of my shouting ‘Hello fairies’ are very low. Why not shout then? Firstly, these days will be very infrequent and the costs involved in identifying them are likely to be prohibitive. But even pushing to one side the costs of identifying these mornings, their infrequency on its own means that we now run into the problem that fairies are unlikely, on the most plausible view that accords them existence, to be much motivated to reveal themselves to people who ask them to do so only infrequently (there is a problem of fairy hiddenness that the believer in fairies will have had to meet with some claim of this sort). A more persistent project of enticing fairies out of hiding would (on any fairy theory with a plausible answer to the problem of fairy hiddenness) be required to be likely to persuade them to reveal themselves than my very infrequently shouting ‘Hello fairies’ would do anything to constitute. That being the case and that sort of persistent project certainly being one the opportunity costs, indeed just straight costs, of which would be too high for me to engage in, I am not even justified in bothering shouting infrequently, ‘Hello fairies!’ should I happen to notice (i.e. have already paid the costs of finding out) that I am making my breakfast on a morning when my wife and the neighbours are out. A similar situation obviously affects the atheist who has assigned God’s existence a low enough probability. Thus these atheists are exempt from the general *prima facie* epistemic obligation to engage in prayer as experiment. We shall return to this in a moment; for now, on to the second objection.

Those who, by whatever route, managed to get themselves into the habit of shouting down the garden path each morning, ‘Hello fairies’, might very well end up believing that fairies were talking back, not because there really were fairies, but rather because they had gone slightly dotty. In 1917, two girls from Bradford reported themselves

to have seen fairies at the bottom of their garden and produced some rather charming photographs which seemed indeed to show them. Much later on in life, one of the sisters admitted that all these photographs were faked, made by mounting paper cut-outs onto twigs. But the other sister seems to have sincerely maintained until her death that, while some of the photos were fakes, some of them showed real fairies.⁸ I imagine that all reading this will agree that, were we to suppose this second sister was sincere in maintaining to the end of her life that she had met fairies at the bottom of her garden, the best explanation of this would be that she had deluded herself. Perhaps prayer might make one similarly dotty.

At least two points deserve to be made in response to this type of objection to prayer as experiment. First, one might reflect, in the manner of William James, that an aversion to risking the acquisition of false belief may be so strong as to be pathological; it is surely not epistemically virtuous to eliminate all risk of coming to a false belief via a certain process of experiment by refusing to engage in that process until (*per impossible*) all danger of its being misleading has been removed. But if that's true, then we have to ask what are the permissible dangers of false positives and do we have any reason to believe that the dangers of them in the case of the prayer experiment we are contemplating conducting are greater than are permissible? Secondly then, we must in each of our own cases individually assess how plausible is the supposed psychological mechanism whereby we risk being rendered dotty, generating false positives for ourselves; and I hazard that, for most agnostics and atheists reading this, it will not be very plausible at all. Most agnostics and atheists are not that suggestible; they will (rightly) believe probably false of themselves claims such as the one that were they to engage in this practice of prayer, even over a relatively elongated period, they would run a significant risk of coming to the belief that there is a God even if there's not through, for example, 'projecting' out into a hallucination a sublimated father-figure. Of some weak-minded people, they will believe, such claims may be true, but they will believe that they are not true of them. And, I suggest, most of them are right.

Again, the analogy of the darkened room seems to me apposite. It may not be unreasonable to suppose of some people that they are so desperate to find a wise old man in the room that they mistake the echo of their own voice for a reply to their quickly-shouted question. Some suffer from schizophrenia in the best of conditions after all and the sensory deprivation attendant upon entering such a room is hardly likely to improve such conditions. But the vast majority of agnostics and atheists can know of themselves, if they can know anything of themselves, that they are not such people. Most people are able, quite rightly, to remove from consideration as a serious possibility that they will mistake the echo of their own voice for a reply to the question, 'Is there anyone there?' when shouted into a darkened room. Similarly, I am suggesting, most agnostics and atheists will be able, quite rightly, to remove from consideration as a serious possibility that they will 'project' some fantasy and thus generate false positives by conducting the sort of prayer experiment which I have suggested is otherwise *prima facie* obligatory on them. Here our two objections interact in a way that allows us more precisely to demarcate the group of atheists who we

⁸ Cooper (1982, pp. 2338–2340).

might think are exempt from the *prima facie* obligation to pray in the light of them: we might suggest that those atheists who assign the hypothesis that they are prone to this sort of psychological condition a greater (even if in itself very small) probability than they assign to God's existence are exempt, indeed should not conduct the prayer experiment. I think though this conclusion would be slightly too quick.

We can better see how these two objections—or rather then qualifications—to my thesis interact by imagining an atheist who has decided to conduct this experiment getting a speedy result: she hears a Road-to-Damascus-style voice, in this case perhaps saying something like, 'Hello, God speaking; I didn't like to intrude on your Atheism earlier, but now you've asked me to do so, I feel I really should venture a few words ...'. This would—I suggest—be very great evidence indeed that there is a God. But of course, on the truth of Atheism, this sort of voice is really better taken as evidence that the person hearing it is—despite her initial assessment of herself as unlikely to be so—prone to project a hallucinatory father-figure or some such. The atheist was reasonably confident, in advance of conducting the experiment, that she was not so prone, but, now this experiment has generated this result, she has evidence against such confidence being well placed after all. The atheist must now consider then the rival hypotheses: she is mentally ill in this peculiar way after all or God exists after all and is trying to speak to her. Which of these is it reasonable for her to think is more likely to be true? I take it that this may vary from case to case, but that in most cases further evidence may be collected through consulting members of the medical profession (is there any reason [other than hearing the voice itself that is] in favour of or against the hypothesis of mental illness?) and perhaps may be provided from other sources (the voice might say, 'Knowing what you're thinking, permit me to perform a few miracles or reveal some unlikely fact of which at the moment you know yourself to be unaware at any level [even an unconscious level], a fact which you may later verify', that sort of thing). And I take it that, once all this evidence is in, in most cases the atheist will remain justified in assigning the mental illness hypothesis a low probability and thus that, even if it remains on the table for her (as a genuine possibility), her hearing the voice does do *something* to increase for her the probability that God exists (even if God's existence remains less probable), and that it do something is all that my argument requires. As I have already said, this prayer experiment is an inconclusive experiment (we may say the data underdetermines the theory), but it is not rendered epistemically useless thereby (all experiments, after all, have that feature). When we believe ourselves to know a particular hypothesis to be false and conduct an experiment which seems to show it, after all, to be true, we always have the option to doubt our senses and so on; but we—surely rightly—do not, as a matter of course, take that option. Let alone do we consider the fact that we could always in principle take it as a reason not to conduct the experiment.

Another way in which one might seek to cast doubt on the *prima facie* duty to experiment with prayer on Atheism is by putting pressure directly on the assumption which has been in the background of my argument so far, the assumption that the issue of whether or not there is a God is important. One might concede that if there is a God, then it is important to come freely to know and love Him, but maintain that if there is not, then it is not important whether or not one freely comes to believe that one knows and loves Him. So, the issue of deciding whether or not there's a God is not one the

importance of which is more or less fixed across Theism and Atheism in the way my argument so far has assumed. Given Atheism as a starting point then, the issue is best judged as unimportant enough to mean that investigation of it in the manner I suggest is not obligatory even for those who have not been exempt from it for the reasons just sketched. Of course this takes away with one hand (in undermining the danger of false positives; they're no longer as dangerous as they would have been had they arisen on an important issue) even as it gives with the other (in undermining the importance of the issue the experiment investigates), but it plausibly takes away less than it gives overall. And were one to believe that those who believe in God and those who do not tend to get on about the same with regards to what is important (so settling the issue of God's existence correctly doesn't have great instrumental value), one would then be rational in rejecting my premise that the issue of whether or not there's a God is very important. There are such atheists, atheists who don't believe that their Atheism is a particularly good thing; so, pending an argument in favour of the 'absolute' (i.e. not relative to how the situation actually stands) importance of metaphysical correctness on the God issue, it could be argued that we should restrict the conclusion and re-express the restricted version in somewhat paradoxical-sounding terms: to the extent that one believes that it's a good thing that one's an atheist, one is under a *prima facie* obligation to pray to stop being so. Of course, those atheists who assign a non-negligible probability to God's existence and yet have a high degree of confidence in the validity (though not of course soundness) of the arguments which lead believers from their belief in the existence of God to their higher-order belief that this lower-order belief is one that it is important they have reached should in consistency assign a non-negligible probability to God's existence being more important than they would otherwise have inclined to suppose, which fact in turn reduces for them the weight that they may rationally put on considerations originating from this area which speak against their praying to stop being atheists.⁹

So, one might ask, 'To which God should one pray?' There are large issues here, ones which about the traditional topic of whether or not all or a significant subset of theistic religions worship the same God. But we may sidestep these by suggesting that in praying 'Is there anyone there?/God, if you're there, please speak to me.' with the intention that it be heard by any God there might be, one's prayer will be heard by that God whether Judaism, Christianity, Islam, theistic versions of Eastern religions, or some other theistic or polytheistic hypothesis is in fact true.¹⁰ So one need have no

⁹ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to me.

¹⁰ Hardy has described the sort of thing I mean: 'I mean a prayer undertaken by an agnostic or an atheist who, having studied the records of experience, is now prepared, with profound sincerity, to attempt a quest for a period of, say, at least 6 months; it might perhaps be a prayer beginning something like this. "God, if there is a God, help me to find you, and having found you, help me to have the strength and courage to do what I feel to be Thy will' (Hardy 1980, quoted by Caroline Franks Davis in her 1986, p. 18). An anonymous reviewer for this journal has pointed out to me that one might argue that, in order to conduct the experiment, more is required of the experimenter by way of opening himself or herself affectively to God than has hitherto been allowed and that this more might be sufficiently onerous for greater numbers of atheists than I have hitherto allowed to be exempted from the duty of so experimenting. There is, it must be conceded, great plausibility in suggestions such as the following. 'Just as the proper understanding of a certain sort of text involves a process of yielding, of porousness to the power of the literature; and just as properly understanding one's own emotional responses is often best achieved not by detached impartial scrutiny but

worries on this score with regards to a simple prayer experiment. In advancing beyond engaging for, say, 10 min a day in uttering this relatively simple form of prayer, e.g. in considering signing up for a weeklong meditative retreat organized by the adherents of one of the theistic religions, it must be admitted one would run into increasing complications in trying to justify this to the atheist as obligatory.

There is force to the suggestion that investigating all theistic hypotheses by elongated and involved religious praxis of the sorts peculiar to each would be an exercise demanding enough to make implausible the claim that atheists are under a *prima facie* obligation to engage in it. Indeed, but the implications of this point may be overstated, primarily as the thesis defended here is not that one is *prima facie* obliged to investigate *any* of them by this method (rather than by uttering the simple generic theistic prayer) and secondarily as even for those atheists who are obliged (and I believe, although I do not defend here, that there are some who are obliged) to use this method, they are not obliged to investigate *all* of them by it, any more than a detective is obliged to interview every member of the population when investigating a particular crime. One needs to draw up a shortlist and start from there. I do not say that there are no issues of philosophical substance here, but just that the general problem of drawing up a shortlist of hypotheses to be tested, as it affects the rationality of conducting

Footnote 10 continued

by listening to the signals form within; so, in just the same way, the religious adherent may claim that the knowledge of God which is the goal of human life is to be found via the path of spiritual praxis—praxis that brings about an interior change, a receptivity, which is the essential precondition for the operation of grace' (Cottingham 2005, p. 12). And thus it could be argued that the suggestion in the main text has rather been along the lines of canvassing the idea that one might investigate the artistic merits of Shakespeare as playwright by reading, once a day for 6 months, scenes abstracted at random from his works. Surely more plausible would be a practice which involved, in addition, reading some works in their entirety at one sitting; attending a series of lectures on them; seeing some performed; and perhaps even acting out scenes or whole plays oneself with one's friends. A closer analogy still (and one developed by Cottingham) might be with psychotherapy, which, as I understand it, requires of those going in for it a relatively wilful commitment to 'give it a go'; there are also characteristic 'defence' mechanisms, which have to be overcome, and one has to be wilfully open to overcoming them if one is to get anything out of it. To sweep all of this into the nature of the experiment that one was seeking to present as *prima facie* obligatory would, of course, increase the danger that the now-ramified experiment would be rationally judged prohibitively costly by more atheists than I have so far allowed. So be it: the concession that the obligation to engage in a more ramified prayer experiment—the sort of praxis that Cottingham has in mind—is not so widespread amongst atheists as is the obligation to engage in the non-ramified experiment with which I concern myself in the main text does nothing to undermine the claim that the obligation to engage in the non-ramified experiment is as widespread as I am suggesting. That one is not obliged to do *x* in addition to *y* (where *x* is something that would be an even better [albeit more costly] experiment than *y*) does not imply that one is not obliged to do *y*. I make a similar point in the main text. The thesis that affective openness, 'porousness', and the like are essential for the *non*-ramified experiment to be potentially viable would depend on the claim that God, were he to exist, would only be inclined to reveal himself to those who ask having already got all their affective openness, 'porousness' and the like in suitable order, which claim itself is one that one has no more reason to find attractive than a parallel claim that we looked at earlier, viz. that God would only answer the prayers of those who had already got their cognitive side in order to the extent of believing that he exists. Compare the unattractiveness of the psychology that one would have to posit for the man in the room were one to suggest that he was inclined only to reveal himself in response to the shouts of those who already knew that he was there with the unattractiveness of the psychology one would have to posit for him were one to suppose that he would only reveal himself to the shouts of those who were already affectively disposed, porous, and the like towards the possibility of his being there and I hazard you will find it as hard as I do to insert a postage stamp between them.

the prayer experiment, is not insuperable and nor is it peculiar to *this* experiment. Prior to devising and conducting *every* experiment, one has to bring to bear similar judgements, judgements which frame and direct the experiment one then goes on to conduct. That the detective cannot interview everyone who might have committed the crime should not de-motivate him from interviewing those on his or her shortlist of suspects, let alone his or her prime suspect.¹¹

Pen-ultimately, we may observe that a parallel experiment suggests itself for the theist. It might be argued that a theist who already has very good reasons to believe in God would be inappropriate in seeking, via such experimentation, reasons which would falsify the worldview to which he or she had been drawn, by analogy with someone who already had very good reasons not to doubt his or her spouse's fidelity being inappropriate in conducting experiments, e.g. hiring a private detective, to investigate this matter further. I think there is some force to such a suggestion, but this exception too can be easily over-stated. The closer analogy would not be hiring a private detective to investigate surreptitiously one's spouse's fidelity, but rather asking one's spouse oneself to explain what others suggest is good reason to doubt his or her fidelity. 'God, I believe. But that Problem of Evil keeps coming up in conversation with my atheist friends. Help me to help their unbelief. What's the answer?' And of course a believer may have doubts—'Actually, thinking about it, these atheist

¹¹ The assumption here is that God would be more likely to reveal Himself to those who ask Him to do so in the manner of the prayer experiment than to those who conduct other experiments, for example dressing in sackcloth and ashes and beating their breasts for 6 months (but without asking any God that there might be to do anything to cheer them up). Why think this? Does this not already suppose some things about the sort of God that's most likely to exist? Indeed it does. But this sort of information is, I take it, available to the atheist. These sorts of issues will have been taken care of in the preliminary stage of drawing up the shortlist of theistic hypotheses to investigate, in assessing the prior probabilities of variants of Theism (and indeed polytheism). So, for example, one variant of Theism would suggest that there is a God, but that He is not as those who believe in Him characteristically suppose; rather, He is annoyed at people praying and reveals Himself solely to those who do not pray to Him that He do so; or perhaps He is disposed to reveal Himself to people who pray to Him in the manner I suggest, but then punish them in an afterlife for having bothered Him. Were each of these hypotheses to be left on the table as each having as high a probability as the conjunction of variants of Classical Theism prior to any investigation, then the rationality of conducting the prayer experiment would be undermined. There would then be significant risks, and not just the risks of 'false positives' of which I make more mention. But such hypotheses are ones which I am assuming that even a cursory foray into Philosophical Theology would give one reason to suppose are more complicated and thus less a priori probable than Classical Theism.

A hypothesis which strikes me as having a higher prior probability than any 'prayer-punishing God'-one, but which might also be suggested to undermine the rationality of conducting the experiment, would posit that any God that exists is more likely to reveal Himself to the morally upright as a reward for their good works, rather than to people who divert themselves from good works in order to conduct an experiment along the lines I am suggesting. People who 'opt out' of their social obligations, by, for example, joining a contemplative monastic order, are less deserving of God's revelations than people who don't go to church for months on end as they are too busy helping out at the local homeless shelter. It's a philosopher's prejudice to value the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa* and not one God would suffer from. Now I think that a good argument may be made for thinking of any revelation given more as a personal response to a question than as an impersonal reward, but, in any case, conducting the experiment I am suggesting and doing good works are not incompatible. The sort of experiment I am suggesting is quite compatible with helping out at homeless shelters and the like. That is to say, the hypothesis that God is as likely to reward the good as respond to the inquiring may be left on the table as a serious possibility; no matter; presumably one has good reason to do the good anyway, so all I am suggesting is that one should layer the prayer experiment over the top of whatever meritorious actions one would be doing in any case.

friends seem to have a good point here’—which are surely understandable to God and which the believer is surely not obliged to try (vainly) to keep from Him or obliged to fail to ask Him to help with. Othello’s psychology, if not entirely healthy, is entirely understandable and a policy of his expressing what he took to be his reasons for doubt frankly and immediately to Desdemona would have served him and their relationship well. Or, had Desdemona remained silent in response, given him reason to terminate it with rather less disastrous consequences than in fact accompanied their separation. So, if we consider, instead of an agnostic or atheist, a theist who finds himself or herself receiving no apparent reply to his or her prayers over an extended period, such a person, I suggest, should—by the same process that would lead the agnostic/atheist to raise the probability of God’s existence were he or she to be in receipt of certain experiences—be led to lower the probability that God exists. Unless the theist has some positive reason to think that if there were a God, He would withdraw in this way from him or her, this is evidence for the theist that there is no God after all and thus he or she would be epistemically indolent were he or she not to adjust his or her beliefs accordingly.

One point we may see now then is that nothing the theist, agnostic or atheist can have experienced during the process of conducting this experiment will have given him or her any reason to believe that this process of praying to God that He reveal Himself is not truth-directed. Just the opposite; anything he or she will have experienced and even the absence of an experience will have simply increased his or her rational estimation of the reliability of this process in putting him or her in touch with ultimate metaphysical truth. Thus he or she will find himself or herself locked into what he or she will have to consider an epistemically virtuous spiral of prayer, one which ever increases his or her rational faith in God or one which ever increases his or her rational certainty that God does not exist.¹² The experience or absence of experience will lead the theist, agnostic or atheist (even if he or she remains an agnostic or atheist or is drawn, via it, in this direction) reasonably to conclude that prayer is truth-directed. Only if the experiences were variable (e.g. for a few nights it seeming as if there is a God; and for the next few its seeming as if there is not) might it seem that this confidence in the process should be undermined. But this variation would over time itself be a reason to favour Atheism, for if there were a God, He would have good reason not to allow the process of prayer to yield such results. We may say then that the practice of prayer, as well as potentially rationally sustaining a theist in his or her Theism (or moving him or her from it), may potentially rationally sustain an agnostic in his or her Agnosticism and an atheist in his or her Atheism (or move him or her from it). Indeed it is precisely because this sort of prayer experiment is open to all these outcomes that—with the few caveats mentioned in this paper—theists, agnostics, and atheists should all engage in it.¹³ Well, *prima facie* should.

¹² If this spiral moves in the direction of increasing the rationality of a belief in God, it will obviously thereby also render more rational the more-ramified type of experiment—religious praxis as we might follow Cottingham in calling it—that we discussed in an earlier note.

¹³ Is my thesis capable of being empirically refuted? Suppose that one divides a large number of atheists into two groups of equal size, the first of which one gets to conduct the prayer experiment, let us say for 10 min a day 5 days a week for 6 months, and the second of which one ensures does not do so. (In variants of this meta-experiment [‘meta’, as it is an experiment concerning the efficacy of the first-order experiment],

Finally then let us return to the point that this is only a *prima facie* obligation. There are other activities that the theist, agnostic, and atheist should engage in—entirely separate from those which pertain to their increasing their rational assurance that they have reached the correct view on the God issue—and some of these—saving people from burning buildings, for example—will plausibly easily make this *prima facie* obligation not an *ultima facie* one for individuals in particular cases. But it cannot be plausible to those reading a journal devoted to the Philosophy of Religion that these other duties outweigh the duty to investigate the God issue in all cases and the thesis of this paper has merely been that, for some amongst those atheists who rightly think of themselves as obliged to devote more than negligible time to reflecting on the rational defensibility of their Atheism, prayer is a proper part of their repertoire of so reflecting. Those ‘some’ for whom this will be a proper part are those who assign God’s existence a non-negligible probability and are not in possession of a plausible argument for scepticism about the truth-directedness of uttering such prayers in their own cases. There are other proper parts to these atheists’ repertoires of course, e.g. investigating the arguments of Natural Theology and so on, and the argument of this paper has not been to the effect that these other parts may never squeeze out the duty of experimenting in prayer. They may. The argument of this paper has rather been to the effect that these atheists cannot conclude that the experimental method has nothing to offer them and to the effect that, given the relatively low costs of conducting it, it is

Footnote 13 continued

one gets the non-control group to perform acts of charity and so forth [with or without having the intention whilst doing so that it would prompt a communication from God].) Let us suppose that the results that come in suggest that those in the first group are not more likely to have moved in the direction of Theism than those in the second group. Initially, one might suggest that such a result would not undermine my thesis; it would simply be evidence that there is no God (for, were there a God, He would not wish for such an outcome). But one might suggest that on further thought such a result could be seen to threaten to disconfirm my thesis, at least weakly. We can perhaps most easily see why such a suggestion might appeal by considering that the Theist who wished to say that such results were not evidence that God did not exist could say that they really simply provide evidence that God is not as motivated to reveal Himself by persistent entreaties as my argument supposes He would be. This, on its own, is though—I would contend—a rather inadequate response to the data. Insofar as the Theist would, before this meta-experiment had produced this result, have agreed with my hypothesis that God would be—*ceteris paribus*—more likely to reveal Himself to someone praying in this manner than to someone who wasn’t, the evidence that has come in is *prima facie* evidence (not conclusive evidence) that God doesn’t exist, as it’s evidence against the conjunction of ‘God exists’ and ‘God would be motivated by this sort of thing to reveal Himself’, the second conjunct of which the Theist is now only beginning to doubt because of the results that have come in. So—pending another argument—the theist should concede that the results must be some evidence, even if only weak evidence, against God’s existence. This other argument may however be provided by pointing out that God would know that the people who were the subjects of this meta-experiment had been grouped in this way for the purpose of investigating just this issue and if He has good reasons to preserve the general level of hiddenness that He does (as on Theism must of course be the case), then, as allowing a statistically significant number of Atheists to be converted during this meta-experiment would be providing for people just the sort of generally accessible reason to believe in Him that He has reason to avoid, He might well decide to stymie the meta-experiment for that reason alone even though in general it remains true that God is more likely—*ceteris paribus*—to reveal Himself to people who pray in this fashion than to those who don’t, that is to say He is more likely to do so whenever they pray in this fashion without being subjects of this sort of meta-experiment. The second conjunct then should, on the most plausible variant of Theism, really read that God would be motivated to reveal Himself by this sort of thing, *unless* this sort of thing were being undertaken as part of this sort of meta-experiment. Given that, these sorts of result being thrown up by such a meta-experiment would not undermine my thesis, even weakly.

hence likely that some forays into it will prove *ultima facie* obligatory for them. It was a believer who first said, ‘Seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened unto you.’¹⁴ But it was Vaughan Williams, an agnostic, who perhaps most memorably put to music the words of Psalm 34: ‘Taste and see how gracious the Lord is’. And whilst it was an atheist, Bertrand Russell, who said that were he to meet God in the afterlife, he would chide Him for not having provided enough *ante-mortem* evidence of His existence, we do not know if Russell anticipated what he would then say were God to reply to him, ‘Well, you didn’t ask me for any, did you?’¹⁵

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¹⁴ *Matthew*, 7. 7.

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