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# DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE IN FILIAL VALUES: THE PROBLEM OF GUIDED GOODNESS

PAUL K. MOSER 

## Abstract

This article's main thesis is that divine self-disclosure to humans is best understood in terms of manifested filial values with a distinctive moral intention aimed at cultivating righteousness. To that end, it identifies and clarifies a neglected *problem of guided goodness* and its significance for God's self-disclosure in manifested filial values. Part I characterizes the relevant values as the potential motivating powers of some goods to enable filial improvement relative to God's perfect moral character. Part II explains how God is related to manifested filial values in terms of God's active and empowering moral character and will. Part III illuminates how God can be experienced by humans through divine self-disclosure in manifested filial values, including in morally searching interventions, such as nudges toward goodness, in conscience. Part IV portrays reciprocity between God's moral will and human wills as central to human receptivity to divine self-disclosure in manifested filial values. Part V clarifies how evidentially grounded assurance for faith in God can arise from divine self-disclosure when cooperatively received by humans. Part VI contrasts my approach to the ground of faith in God with some views of Martin Buber and H. Richard Niebuhr. Moral phenomenology, aided by the apostle Paul, emerges as central to understanding divine self-disclosure in manifested filial values.

Do you despise the riches of God's goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God guides you to repentance?

— Romans 2:4

## Introduction

Answering the longstanding question of how God is self-disclosed benefits from a seemingly unrelated question: which came first, values or human valuers? Perhaps values came before humans and were discovered later by them. Of course, if God exists along with divine values prior to humans, those values did not await the existence of humans. Values, in any case, seem able to exist without God. Certainly, the idea of values can exist without the idea of God. Many people evidently have some understanding of what values are, although they lack a notion of God. Even so, God may figure in values in a distinctive way, as we shall see.

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If values do not depend for their existence on human valuers, they can be features of human-independent reality and thus can challenge human valuers, perhaps even in a way that opens a window to God's reality and character. This article contends that some distinctive manifested values have this role and supply evidence for God's reality while also allowing for divine elusiveness and hiddenness toward humans in many cases. The neglect of this position has left much discussion of the evidence for God at a stalemate at best. This article aims to break that stalemate, with attention to how some manifested values can be direct interpersonal evidence of God's reality and redemptive purpose for humans.

The article emphasizes not primarily our will to believe or even our will to value, but the vital importance of some interpersonal filial values presented to us in direct divine self-disclosure. Once those human-independent values emerge, we can turn to the matter of our dependent response with a will to value or not to value the distinctive values in question. Ontology thus precedes epistemology, here as elsewhere.

### *Part I: Values as Powers*

We shall consider the view that values are potentially motivating goods, such as being righteous or being courageous, that merit approval from people in a position to give approval or disapproval. According to this view, values are not reducible to human judgments, valuations, or feelings about value. Attending to one ordinary linguistic use, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, third edition, offers the following as a definition of "value": "quality viewed in terms of importance, usefulness, desirability, etc. The relative worth, usefulness, or importance of a thing or (occasionally) a person." Ordinary use will not settle a philosophical or theological issue, of course, but it can illustrate a noteworthy semantic meaning.

The use of "value" among philosophers and theologians varies widely, with emphases ranging from concepts to beliefs to judgments to feelings. We cannot digress to the metaphysics of values, but it is important for this article to allow for manifested values that have an independence of humans in challenging human attitudes. In addition, it is important to allow for manifested values to go beyond abstract, static "Forms" and causally influence humans in their moral experience. A manifested value, we shall see, is not reducible to a static concept of a value or to a mere belief about what is valuable.

As a characterization of values for this article's purposes, we may offer:

*Values are qualities with causal powers either to improve, to better, or to make worthwhile something or to attract someone to do so by the values' empowering quality toward improvement.*

This characterization does not make the reality of values depend on human approval, favor, endorsement, feeling, belief, judgment, or supporting reason.<sup>1</sup> It thus avoids a

<sup>1</sup> Here I dissent from Robert M. Adams' suggestion that it is "probably impossible ... to get value judgments out of the foundations of objectivity." See Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 23. I also dissent, as illustrated below, from his resulting epistemology of value based on (what William P. Alston called) "doxastic practices" and from his Platonic talk of God as "the Good." I doubt that there is any such singular thing as "the Good," even if many things are objectively good. I also doubt that established "doxastic practices" always agree with our best evidence, as illustrated in relation to some evidence from the sciences.

common confusion of the reality of a value with a human attitude or response toward it. Thomas Hobbes, for instance, fell prey to that confusion in remarking: “[Let people] rate themselves at the highest value they can; yet their true value is no more than it is esteemed by others.”<sup>2</sup> Contrary to Hobbes, values (at least of the kind relevant to this article) can exist without having any human response, and they can be discovered, without being created, by humans. They also can survive in the presence of false value judgments and misleading value feelings among humans.

Values have a relativity not to a human response but to what their power can improve. For instance, the value had by salt water for improving the life of a whale does not apply in the same way to the life of a human. In addition, the value had by a college education for various humans does not extend to dogs and cats, or even to all humans. We thus may say that the scope of values can vary in *potential beneficiaries*, but this is not relativism about values resulting from variable beliefs or feelings about values. Values differ from truth and factuality in having such variability of scope, as truth and factuality do not vary by the scope of their beneficiaries. Even so, the reality of values, truths, and facts is not at the mercy of how people respond with their beliefs or feelings toward values, truths, or facts. In this regard, a kind of objectivity stems from the belief- and feeling-independence of values, as in the case of truth and facts.

Being loving (as being unselfishly caring), being honest, and being humble are examples of familiar values for humans, at least as understood in their typical manifestations. They are real qualities with powers to make something better, or at least to attract someone to do so. Self-destructive condemnation, in contrast, is not a value in its typical manifestation, because it is not a quality with power toward improvement. In general, qualities are not values when they lack power either to improve, to better, or to make worthwhile something or to attract someone to do so.

What of hammers, saws, and other physical tools? Are they values, or, instead, do they simply *have* value? We typically do not say that a hammer or a saw is a value, but we often say that they are valuable or have value, such as when they aid with our repairing a bookcase. The OED offers a relevant definition from ordinary use: “the quality of a thing considered in respect of its ability to serve a specified purpose or cause a particular effect.” It gives this example from the *Popular Science Monthly* of 1908: “Algebra and geometry have a high practical as well as definite intellectual value.” I shall follow this ordinary use and avoid talk of a hammer or a saw as itself a value, talking instead of the value *had* by a hammer or a saw owing to its having (rather than being) a quality with causal power to improve something.

Values as qualities with power have their negations in what may be called *detractors of value*. Some writers call these “negative values” or “disvalues”, thus suggesting that they are themselves values. Such talk of negative values, however, seems to rely on the idea that their being *valued* makes them values, even if negative values. The latter idea, I suggest, is inadvisable, confusing human valuation with values. An actual value, beyond valuation as a supposed value, is a quality with the kind of power indicated above. There are, of course, qualities with power to worsen or to degrade something, even a person. Selfishness, greed, and lust are familiar examples. They are detractors or negators of value, and thus they do not merit being called “values.”

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1651]), i. x. 42.

Values can be qualities with two compatible, non-exclusive kinds of power for improvement: intrinsic and instrumental. An *intrinsic* value is a quality with the power to improve something without reliance on any other value. An example of an intrinsic moral value is the powerful quality, found in many people, of having morally good intentions. That quality can morally improve people, including people having the intentions, without relying on any other value in doing so. Such an intrinsic value does not depend for its being a value on any other value. It also can be, however, an instrumental value in contributing to the reality of additional values (in which case it is not *merely* instrumental or *merely* intrinsic). An *instrumental* value contributes to another value as part of the initial value's power to improve. The value of my devotion to regular physical exercise, for instance, contributes to the value had by my overall physical health. In addition, the value of my devotion to exercise owes its power as a value to being a means to improve my overall physical health. It is thus a merely instrumental, and not an intrinsic, value.

Values inhabit different domains: moral, aesthetic, epistemic, economic, political, legal, and so on. They are thus qualities with power to improve something in moral, aesthetic, epistemic, economic, political, legal, and other domains. The diversity of domains, however, allows for conflicts of values. For instance, something can be a powerful economic value in improving our income while being morally harmful and thus in conflict with moral value. We see this kind of conflict in various manifestations of unbridled capitalism. People are morally harmed in various ways, such as being moved toward selfishness, for the sake of increased profit, even their own increased profit. As a result, many countries with a moral concern put restrictions on profit-making in order to benefit the common good. Some proponents of capitalism may prefer to let "the invisible hand" deal with this problem, but the dominant view among capitalist countries is that more is needed to protect the best interests of vulnerable groups. Economic value, then, can run afoul of moral value.

We face, inside or outside value conflicts, the unavoidability of the "ought." Even when we deny the relevance of "ought" in a context, we plausibly can ask in that context: *Ought* we to deny the relevance of "ought"? Whatever the answer, and whatever the specific sense of "ought," the question ultimately concerns not just what is obligatory but also what is good or valuable in a context. In addition, the question does not go away, even when people want to avoid it. We humans are not the creators of the unavoidability of the "ought." We discover it as having its own status, challenging us to consider what is good or valuable in a context. This places a challenge of potential accountability on us, perhaps even moral accountability, in any context.

## *Part II: Values and God*

We shall consider a role for God in resolving value conflicts with a priority ranking for value domains. The moral domain, given this role, has top ranking in divine priorities, as a reflection of God's perfect personal character and corresponding will. From this perspective, the distinctively *moral* ideal and domain represent values for perfect interpersonal reconciliation, ultimately between God and humans and, on that basis, between humans. This sets God's moral domain of values apart from, or better above, other domains of value, such as aesthetic, epistemic, economic, political, and legal domains. (It does not follow that the moral domain is allowed to disregard evidence.)

The standard and the goal for the relevant moral domain are set by the perfect personal character of God (and its corresponding will) as *worthy* of worship and full commitment. The role of divine *character* will save us from an unspecified, possibly arbitrary, will that supports Plato's Euthyphro problem for relating God to value.<sup>3</sup> We shall see that divine perfection seeks (that is, wills toward) perfect interpersonal reconciliation among agents as a reflection of God's perfect character. Such divinely grounded perfection arises in the Hebrew Bible and in the teaching of Jesus. For instance: "You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy" (Lev. 20:26; cf. 1 Pet. 1:16; NRSV here and in subsequent biblical translations unless otherwise noted.) In addition, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commands: "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). God's perfect character thus sets the ultimate moral standard for humans, in this perspective, even if they are unaware of this.

Moral values and duties, we shall see, can emerge in human experience from the direct divine self-disclosing of qualities of God's perfect character to humans. The apostle Paul points in this direction, while acknowledging the turbulence that can arise in moral experience as a result:

What the flesh desires [ἐπιθυμεῖ] is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed [ἀντικεινται] to each other. ... But if you are led [ἄγεσθε] by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh [ἔργα τῆς σαρκός] are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. ... By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit [καρπὸς τοῦ πνεύματος] is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. (Gal. 5:17-23)<sup>4</sup>

"Flesh," in Paul's thought, is the part of the world that *can* (but need not) go against God, whereas the "Spirit" represents God's perfect character. As a result, flesh can create a conflict with God's moral perspective. Theologians and philosophers have not given due attention to the role of "the fruit of the Spirit" in divine self-disclosure and corresponding evidence for divine reality; we shall begin to correct that deficit.

James D. G. Dunn correctly notes that "the quality of character" indicated by the fruit of the Spirit, in Paul's perspective, shows "the nature of God's Spirit" and thus the character of God.<sup>5</sup> The relevant moral qualities in Paul's list of fruits are best understood as God's moral values, as they represent God's moral character in terms of features that are potentially motivating for humans. In Paul's thinking, as Dunn notes, God's moral character is "Christlike," and "the Spirit of Christ" (Rom. 8:9-11) perfectly represents the Spirit of God. Christ's moral character in relation to God brings specificity to Paul's talk of the Spirit of

<sup>3</sup> On such a view, see Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 267, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 110-13.

<sup>4</sup> My reliance on Paul for illumination in this area relies only on his undisputed letters: 1 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans, and Philippians. For a careful presentation of the relevant evidence, see Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, revised edition, trans. H. C. Kee (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1975), 255-366, and Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1997), Part III. In addition, I hold that Paul's remarks must earn their keep by their explanatory, abductive value relative to our overall evidence; they thus do not get a pass just because they are found in the New Testament.

<sup>5</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (London: A & C Black, 1993), 308.

God, thus saving it from being abstract and obscure and giving it further moral definiteness.

Paul speaks of what the Spirit of God (actively) “desires,” and this includes what God’s Spirit *intends* to bring about among humans. In this perspective, the relevant fruit is borne by the Spirit of God, courtesy of divine intentions and interventions corresponding to God’s character. As this fruit includes God’s moral values, those values are borne by God’s Spirit on the basis of God’s moral character, and they are directed toward human moral experience, including in morally searching interventions, such as nudges toward moral goodness, in human conscience (Rom. 9:1). Paul thus holds of the children of God that “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). This is part of an intentional divine effort to *guide* cooperative humans toward character formation (Gal. 5:18, 25, Rom. 5:4, 8:14), whereby they (eventually) become “holy” or morally “perfect” as God is.<sup>6</sup> Paul regards such interactive divine guidance of humans to be central to their “salvation” (Phil. 2:12–13).

The role of divine intentions in manifested moral value helps to explain the typical volitional pull with morally relevant pressure from those values. The pull with pressure arises from the uncoercive influence, the moral nudge, of a (divine) will on another (human) will for directed motivation toward something good. We thus should ask: why are values motivating at all, in the empowering way they are, at least for many people? A role for divine will or intention with its uncoercive volitional influence aids in a needed explanation. Moral values typically have an uncoercive attractive power because God’s accompanying goal-directed will has uncoercive power to attract and influence in moral interaction, such as in conscience. Paul thus thinks of our conscience as something that “bears witness” to the moral values in God’s law, resulting in “conflicting thoughts [that] will accuse or perhaps excuse” people in due course (Rom. 2:15).

We need not consider God to be a moral value by, for instance, identifying God with “the good.” I doubt, as suggested, that there is such a singular thing as “the good,” let alone God as that singular thing. We have, as the OED notes, familiar talk of “worth or worthiness (of a person) in respect of rank or personal qualities.” If values are, as suggested, powerful qualities, we have good reason for caution toward talk of God as a value. Personal agents are not reducible to qualities, however powerful. Their having self-directed wills makes them irreducible to the powerful, potentially motivating qualities we have recognized as values, even though they can have and manifest values. As a result, I shall avoid an inference from “God is good” to “God is the good.” I also shall avoid talk of God as “the origin” of goodness, because if God is good, has the value of being good, and has no beginning, goodness does not have a temporal origin.

Refraining from talk of God as “the good” raises no problem for the following suggestion from Wilhelm Herrmann: “Everyone who has come to be at all conscious of what is good may be led on to understand that God can be none other than the

<sup>6</sup> On this basis, Paul calls the faithful Christians at Corinth “saints,” despite their ongoing shortcomings, as an evidential letter of Christ: “You show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets that are human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God” (2 Cor. 3:3–4). Paul thus finds evidentially-grounded confidence for faith in the disciples’ character transformation, courtesy of God’s Spirit, toward the divine righteousness in Christ.

personal vitality and power of goodness.”<sup>7</sup> The talk of “the personal vitality and power of good” may be understood in terms of divine goal-directed, potentially motivating pressure on human wills from God’s active values. This perspective fits with following observation of H. Wheeler Robinson: “For those who believe that there is no adequate explanation of morality which does not trace it back to the ultimate pressure of Spirit upon spirit, every act of moral choice becomes a new revelation of God.”<sup>8</sup> The matter of an “adequate explanation of morality” is controversial, of course, and we need not exclude robust ethics without God. The key point is that the moral pressure in question may be revelatory of God, even when humans are unaware of that fact. We need to consider, then, how divine self-disclosure can emerge from divine values.

### *Part III: God and Good Experienced*

Perhaps we have failed to recognize God’s presence to our awareness at some time, even though God was present at that time, in virtue of attracting our attention (not to be confused with our focusing our attention on God or interpreting something as God). We can be aware of many things, including people, without recognizing them for what or who they are. Awareness does not guarantee recognition of its object for humans, even with regard to God as an object of awareness.<sup>9</sup> So, however skeptical our perspective on God’s reality, we should be open, at least in principle, to new, previously missed recognition with regard to awareness of God. The fallibility of our recognition in awareness calls for this.

A key issue is whether we have in our experience any discernible guided, or goal-directed, goodness aimed at us but emerging from beyond a human source. This is a question about experienced goodness that has a recognizable purpose but exceeds mere human goodness toward us. It thus is not a question just about moral values or principles, or any other normative features that omit an intention. Our question is therefore not about a moral law apart from a *lawgiver*, the latter being an intentional moral agent who intentionally gives a moral law to humans. Thus, Platonic forms as values, whatever their role in morality, are not to the point here, given their static nonintentional nature that lacks an intentional causal role in moral experience.

If there is the intentional goodness in question, we can ask about its ultimate bearer. We also should ask why there is any such goodness in our lives at all, if there is. We often take for granted in our lives goodness as kindness, for instance, as if it is no occasion for surprise or appreciation. As a result, we typically fail to probe or even to perceive the depths of goodness as kindness presented to us, including the prospect of its exceeding human sources. We thus miss out on distinctive evidence for God and divine goodness.

The reality of kindness and other morally relevant goodness presented to us with a goal raises an explanatory problem, especially if God does not exist. This problem is akin to the problem of evil for God’s existence, if God exists. Let us call it *the problem of*

<sup>7</sup> Herrmann, *Communion of the Christian with God*, trans. J. S. Stanyon (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1971 [1906]), 121.

<sup>8</sup> H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit* (London: Harper, 1928), 97.

<sup>9</sup> A distinction between God *de re* and God *de dicto* underlies this point; for discussion, see Paul K. Moser, “God *De Re et De Dicto*: Kierkegaard, Faith, and Religious Diversity,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 74, no. 2 (2021): 135–46. See also Paul K. Moser, *The God Relationship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 68–73.

*guided goodness*: why is there such goodness at all in our lives? If God emerges directly somehow in human awareness, a key indication of God's reality would be in some morally good quality manifested in our experience, such as in the depths of felt kindness or similar goodness, despite broad neglect of this consideration by inquirers about God. It is easy for us to look for God in the wrong place or to choose not to look at all. We then fail to give God an adequate hearing. In that case, our agnosticism (withholding judgment about divine reality) or atheism (denying divine reality) would be deficient, owing to its inadequate coverage of relevant available evidence.

If the term "God" is a title requiring worthiness of worship (including full adoration, trust, and obedience) and thus perfect moral goodness, we have a hint of what to expect of God.<sup>10</sup> We then should ask about the availability of unsurpassed moral goodness presented to us by God in our experience. The book of Exodus suggests as much in its portrayal of God appearing to Moses: "Moses said [to the Lord], 'Show me your glory, I pray.' And he said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.' But, he said, 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live'" (Exodus 33:18-20). God's unique "glory" and its power, according to this report, are in God's distinctive *goodness*. Thus: "The Lord passed before [Moses], and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation'" (Exodus 34:6-7).<sup>11</sup>

How, or in what ways, does God's goodness "pass before" a person in experience? We need to ask what features or qualities such passing goodness would have. Perhaps Moses experienced divine goodness to a special degree, but his experience need not have been unique in kind, as if only he had it. Other people have testified to similar experiences of such goodness, thus suggesting that God and divine goodness figure directly in their experience. We can begin to evaluate this suggestion if we identify the qualitative content of the alleged experience of God.

Without representation in the qualitative content of human experience, God would serve as a mere theoretical postulate from the standpoint of such content. In that case, God would not emerge in the qualitative content of human awareness but would leave it empty of divine presence. The result would be at most a purely intellectual or theoretical avenue to God, akin to postulating an unobservable entity in subatomic physics. God thus would have all the interpersonal attraction and guidance of a muon in physics—that is, none. Failing to find God in the qualitative content of experience can leave God in that impersonal role, similar to the personally absent gods of deism. This can leave some theists, individually and in groups, without firsthand awareness and recognition of manifested divine moral power and its benefits.

Divine goodness emerges as multi-faceted in the book of Exodus and related biblical writings, even in the case of goodness of the morally relevant kind that some biblical writers call "righteousness."<sup>12</sup> The latter righteousness includes at least divine mercy, grace, patience, love, and faithfulness toward humans. Such goodness can help to curb many

<sup>10</sup> On the importance of this title for responsible inquiry about God, see Moser, *The God Relationship*, 43-44, 117-19.

<sup>11</sup> For relevant discussion, see Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 299-300.

<sup>12</sup> On the main contours and moral relevance of righteousness in a range of biblical writings, see Sam K. Williams, "The 'Righteousness of God' in Romans," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99, no. 2 (1980): 241-90, and Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul's Gospel and Mission* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 12-46.

human problems, such as guilt, shame, blame, anxiety, worry, grief, indifference, confusion and distraction. To that end, it can give humans needed focus, forgiveness, and hope, thereby integrating otherwise disparate features of their lives.

The different variations on guided divine moral goodness arguably have a common core: seeking the (full) reconciliation of humans to God in righteous filial cooperation.<sup>13</sup> In that regard, they also include a divine moral challenge and even judgment toward humans for the sake of their embracing filial values such as righteousness in relation to God as their caring and correcting parent. (Such judgment is not to be confused with the condemnation or the destruction of humans.<sup>14</sup>) The adjective “filial” is used here to connote God’s functional role as such a parent, in keeping with a central teaching of Jesus.<sup>15</sup> The challenge and the judgment in question can emerge in human conscience, nudging people toward God’s perfect righteousness and away from human selfishness. We should ask, then, whether our moral experience in conscience fits with this prospect. Conscience, however, need not be a substantial faculty or an organ; it may be a functional interpersonal process of moral challenge and reflection, perhaps toward a moral goal initiated and guided by God.

If God is serious about encouraging human righteousness, we should expect some diversity in active divine intervention and representation in human conscience and experience, corresponding to diversity in human ways of receptivity. We then should consider God’s option to self-disclose righteousness in human conscience and experience in various ways, creating different variations on good turbulence and awareness of God in our moral experience. God thus could be involved in prompting an engaged human conscience with various critical and constructive features, aimed at having humans confront and struggle for divine righteousness firsthand. God could invite, for instance, human guilt for moral failure toward cultivating experienced righteousness, thereby encouraging our moral improvement, including in relation to other people. Human adults are typically familiar with a troubled conscience firsthand, including a guilty conscience, even if they do not recognize being guided by anything beyond human influence. Freud, for instance, thought that the input of conscience was the result only of human, rather than divine, influence.<sup>16</sup> The matter, however, is complicated.

Psalm 139 suggests how God could surface, in a morally searching manner, in the divine probing of human conscience and moral experience:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.  
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
 you discern my thoughts from far away.  
 You search out my path and my lying down,

<sup>13</sup> On the central importance of divine-human reconciliation in much biblical thought, see P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, second edition (London: Independent Press, 1938), chaps. 2-4, and Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul’s Theology* (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1981).

<sup>14</sup> For discussion, see Stephen H. Travis, *Christ and the Judgement of God*, second edition (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> For cautious discussion of the historical context of Jesus’s use of “Abba” for God, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “Abba and Jesus’ Relation to God,” in *À cause de l’évangile: études sur les synoptiques et les Actes*, LD (Paris: Cerf, 1985), 15-38; James Barr, “Abba isn’t ‘Daddy,’” *Journal of Theological Studies* 39, no. 1 (1988): 28-47; and Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1994), Vol. 1, 172-75. They correct some sweeping claims in the scholarly literature about uniqueness in his linguistic use of the term. Cf. Paul K. Moser, *The Divine Goodness of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), chapter 3.

<sup>16</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Random House, 1939), 183-89.

and are acquainted with all my ways. ...  
 You hem me in, behind and before,  
 and lay your hand upon me. (Psalm 139:1-3, 5)

The psalmist refers to human thoughts discerned by God through the divine searching of a human. Such searching involves the inward moral life of a human, and it bears on human conscience.<sup>17</sup> Paul reported to the Roman Christians on that matter: "I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience [συνειδήσεως] confirms it by the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 9:1; cf. 2 Cor. 1:12, 5:11).

The relevant claim is not that conscience always is the voice of God or that it invariably confirms God's presence. Instead, the claim is that God can and sometimes does intervene in human experience via conscience, verbally or otherwise.<sup>18</sup> Upon being probed by God in a morally searching manner, human conscience can convey a divine intention to guide a person toward righteousness in various ways. In that case, conscience represents goal-directed activity that includes guided divine goodness. Such interpersonal divine activity would be significantly different from a static moral value, principle, or law. It would represent intentional moral guidance. It also would bear directly on what we have called "the problem of guided goodness." Kant's influential focus on the moral law within largely neglects such intentional activity, owing to a neglect of interactive moral phenomenology.

Countering Kant, John Baillie has remarked as follows: "In the experience of moral obligation, there is contained and given the knowledge, not only of a Beyond, but of a Beyond that is in some sort actively striving to make itself known to us and to claim us for its own. ... For it is not merely that through our values we reach God or that from them we infer [God], but that in them we find [God]."<sup>19</sup> We need to state how this approach bears on evidence for a personal, intentional God beyond just static values. The main issue concerns what feature lends credibility to the claim that we find an active personal God "in" some manifested values.

The best answer to our issue points to intentional qualitative directedness experienced in some manifested values. We need not generalize this lesson to all values or obligations, because value experiences can, and do, vary in their experienced intentional robustness. Some value experiences, however, include acquaintance with goodness in conscience repeatedly over time. They also include a felt nudge toward becoming morally good, again and again, without coercing a person's will. Hence,

<sup>17</sup> James Denney has suggested that this is the best evidence available for God's reality; see his *Letters of Principal James Denney to W. Robertson Nicoll* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1920), 80; cf. Denney, *The Way Everlasting* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911), 2-4. For a related probing discussion, see Thomas Erskine, "The Purpose of God," in Erskine, *The Spiritual Order*, third edition (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1884), 47-75.

<sup>18</sup> For an illuminating treatment of conscience and divine authority, see P. T. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority* (London: Independent Press, 1913). For a range of positions on conscience in twentieth-century, particularly Catholic moral theology, see Matthew Levering, *The Abuse of Conscience* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021). We cannot digress now to the metaphysics of conscience or to the surrounding moral disputes.

<sup>19</sup> John Baillie, *The Interpretation of Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), 462, 470; also cited in John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 131-32. A similar approach, in terms of "value-resistance" is found in Herbert H. Farmer, *Towards Belief in God* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 48-51. Value-resistance alone, however, will not yield an intentional God; value-guidance is needed to support intentionality and hence a personal God at work. This lesson is neglected in the tradition of Kant and, in his wake, Albrecht Ritschl. For relevant discussion of Ritschl, see H. R. Mackintosh, "The Philosophical Presuppositions of Ritschlianism," in Mackintosh, *Some Aspects of Christian Belief* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), 121-55.

we should allow the relevant experiences to be diachronic, and not just synchronic, in a person's life.

A person can have a sense of *being pursued* uncoercively but invitingly by something good in conscience, and this can be God in pursuit of that person to support moral improvement. We may think of this as being pursued by God for filial moral improvement, under divine parental care. For instance, many people testify to being challenged in conscience to have and show self-giving caring toward an enemy, in a manner akin to their being shown such caring. They find this moral experience in conscience to be best explained, on their overall evidence, by a divine role of active challenge and support in their conscience for filial moral good for people, including themselves. Their ultimate evidence is their qualitative moral experience in conscience, and not the inference to an explanation. An explanatory, abductive inference, however, enables them to *state* the ground for their recognizing a divine role.

We should allow for nonverbal intervention by God in conscience. In agreement with the psalmist, Paul speaks of "God who searches the heart," which includes the conscience, and he adds: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26-27). The morally relevant searching and sighs from God in human experience have a purpose, according to Paul. They aim to provide divine guidance for humans toward an obedient filial relation with God suitable to divine righteousness.

Paul remarks: "All who are guided by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba!, Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:14-16, replacing "led" [ἄγονται] in the NRSV with "guided"; cf. Gal. 4:6). The divine guidance, according to Paul (echoing the Aramaic "Abba" from Jesus), is to attract and develop, sometimes through prayer, our being faithful and obedient children of God as our Father. We thus have talked of divine disclosures in *filial* values that support *familial* relationships based in God as Abba. (The next section identifies how experienced *agapē* from God figures in Paul's approach.)

Attention to conscience can reveal ongoing moral challenge and support for us. Typically, the content of conscience is not a merely aesthetic phenomenon, such as with the moving colors of a kaleidoscope. Instead, it often features burdens and affirmations, as if we are beckoned, invited, or called in a morally better direction. We thus can be challenged and supported toward righteousness, with the prompting of our self-reflection toward a voluntary, uncoerced response. The challenge could include what Paul considers God's subjecting our anti-God ways to "futility," in order to allow for the emergence of God's distinctive power of righteousness (Rom. 8:20-21). Paul expects faith in God to be based on such power as its supporting evidence (1 Cor. 2:4-5). We can benefit from reflection on the ultimate source of the guided challenge and support in question.

Paul held that the divine challenge and support come with a self-giving presentation of God in human experience, courtesy of the Spirit of God. He thus cites the book of Isaiah to endorse the following claim attributed to God: "I have shown myself [ἐμαυτὴς ἐγερόμην] to those who did not ask for me" (Rom. 10:20; cf. Isa. 65:1, LXX). Paul thinks of God as self-disclosing the divine character in the Spirit of God and of Christ to people for the sake of their being adopted as faithful children of God (Rom. 8:9-11). This self-disclosure is not reducible to the disclosure of propositional information, and it fits with

a theme from Jesus in Luke's Gospel: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13). The Spirit in question includes the manifested power of God for righteousness in interpersonal relations. Such power, according to Jesus and Paul, motivates and focuses the kingdom of God, thereby representing God's moral character (Matt. 6:33, Rom. 14:17). It also seeks positive, reciprocal responses from intended recipients.

#### *Part IV Reciprocity in Response*

God's self-disclosure to humans, in Paul's perspective, includes God's self-offering as guiding Lord for their reconciliation to God. Its historical high point is God's offering of Jesus as God's blameless Son on behalf of wayward humans, and that offering is a "sacrifice of atonement" (ἱλαστήριον) for reconciliation, in Paul's language (Rom. 3:24-25; cf. Rom. 8:32, 2 Cor. 5:19).<sup>20</sup> Going beyond ancient history to contemporary reality, God now offers the gift of God's Spirit to apply and to extend the divine sacrifice of atonement in Jesus. That gift, in Paul's thought, empowers cooperative humans to reciprocate toward God's self-sacrifice by human self-giving to God as guiding Lord.

Paul remarks: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1; cf. Phil. 2:17). Such a living sacrifice is central to the "obedience of faith" in God promoted by Paul (Rom. 1:5, 16:26), and it is the crucial means to "discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2). It supplies human participation in the righteous self-sacrifice manifested by God in Christ. In doing so, it has humans receive God's power of righteous reconciliation in their lives, thus giving them needed familiarity with that power in its coming to fruition. Faith anchored in that power enables a righteous life in filial relation to God; it thus is no mere intellectual or theoretical matter. Such faith, as cooperatively receptive of divine power, is central to the direction of a human life, toward cooperation with God in righteousness. Trust in God, then, is not assent to a conclusion of an argument. God thus seeks human participation in divine filial goodness, beyond mere intellectual assent toward it, and that participation would include self-sacrifice for good.<sup>21</sup>

Paul identifies a divine basis in human experience for hope and faith in God and thus for a righteous life: "Hope [in God] does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5). Hope does not disappoint in that case, because it has a ground in divine love presented in the experience of receptive humans. Such love underwrites hope in divine goodness for the future, as it now indicates how God will work in the future for those receptive of that love (Rom. 8:28). If "our hearts" include "our consciences," we should consider the experience of divine love as part of the divine challenge and support toward filial goodness in human

<sup>20</sup> Paul's language of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians suggests that he does not reduce reconciliation to justification, given that he considers the Christians at Corinth to be justified before God but still in need of (further) reconciliation to God. Cf. Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), Vol. 1, 443-44.

<sup>21</sup> On the widely neglected topic of human reciprocity with divine self-sacrifice in Paul's thought, see Paul K. Moser, *Paul's Gospel of Divine Self-Sacrifice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), especially chapters 2-3.

conscience. Paul would apply a similar point to human faith in God (Rom. 5:1): it has its ground in experienced divine love that makes God worthy of human trust and hope.

The experience of divine love, as suggested, does not coerce humans against their own will. They proceed instead on the basis of voluntary human receptivity when they cooperate. So, by divine concession, such presented love can be blocked or muted by uncooperative humans. They thus can “frustrate” the love from God (Gal. 2:21) to their own detriment. So, the question, “Why does not God simply *make* humans good?,” rests on a misconception of divine love and its honoring human responsibility.

Divine love is received by humans as they cooperate with it upon experiencing it, perhaps in conscience. Such human cooperation enables God’s love to come to fruition in human experience for what it is intended to be: a powerful divine invitation to faithful cooperation toward filial improvement in righteousness. Barring cooperation, a person may fail to see divine love’s unique power in its fruition. William Newton Clarke has identified a background assumption: “It is [ideal] that the flower advance to the fruit of which it is the promise, and the fruit is the character worthy of such a being. The character that is worthy of a human being is the lowly reproduction of the character of God.”<sup>22</sup> The relevant cooperation, free of human earning or meriting, enables divine love to become formative and thereby salient in a human life toward filial improvement, perhaps with nudging from conscience. It thus gives such love a central role in defining the direction of a human life, toward righteousness in relationships, divine and human.

Lack of cooperation with guided divine goodness would result in a missed opportunity for receiving firsthand salient evidence of God’s reality and goodness. Divine love still could be on offer, seeking to be received among humans, but it then would find no motivating foothold for coming to fruition in redemptive cooperation. Nonetheless, a God who respects personal agency, a necessary condition for an interactive loving relationship, would take the risk of such rejection by humans. Their rejection of guided divine goodness presented to them would amount to rejection of God, even if they are unaware of this.

The self-disclosure of guided divine goodness toward humans would be morally supporting but also morally challenging for them. A pressing issue is: will humans properly value the goodness on offer rather than neglect or oppose it? Complacency toward it would threaten its due appreciation and be equivalent to its rejection, at least from the standpoint of cooperation with it. As a test for whether humans properly care about experienced divine goodness, we can ask whether they seriously inquire about, attend to, examine, explore, or monitor it. This question can illuminate the issue of whether they value it for what it is, if they experience it. If they do, they will interact with it positively, candidly looking for its character, basis, and value. They thus would devote time to it, to avoid neglecting it. In that case, guided goodness may come alive as distinctively interpersonal and interactive for some people. It thus could become evidence for divine reality and goodness.

A vital issue, as suggested, is whether some goodness experienced in conscience is either responsive or communicative to humans in a way indicating its being intentional, guided toward a goal. Some people report their moral experience to include their being commanded, encouraged, or otherwise nudged to act in a certain direction. In that case, the experienced goodness represents a personal agent, and not an impersonal cause. It

<sup>22</sup> William Newton Clarke, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1909), 104.

then is a candidate for being a moral guide with a purpose. If it shows no moral defect over time and is worthy of our trust for moral guidance, we plausibly can ask how it is related to God. Perhaps God is then at work in our moral experience, seeking to benefit us with the goodness presented. If we ignore or dismiss this prospect, we may overlook important evidence of God's reality and self-disclosed goodness. (I see no reason to separate the two in experience.) We thus may block responsible inquiry about God while ignoring the problem of guided goodness.

We can respond to guided goodness in conscience with indifference, opposition, or cooperation. If we cooperate, we respond to it positively, with an agreeable motive or intention, even if we demand more evidence of its actual value and purpose over time. Such responding is a kind of positive repentance because it includes our turning agreeably to the goodness offered. (Paul appears to agree; see 1 Thess. 1:9, 2 Cor. 3:16.) We gain nothing secure, however, if we quickly over-interpret goodness in conscience, jumping too fast to advanced theology that supports a particular intellectual tradition or system.

Experience of God in guided goodness can expand and deepen over time, with new recognition in the process, and theology can proceed accordingly. Evidence of God in experience thus can start small, and then grow over time as one cooperates with it and as the initial evidence comes to fruition. Attending to divine goodness in conscience over time, according to Paul, is part of "living according to the Spirit" of God and "setting one's mind on the things of the Spirit" (Rom. 8:5). When such attending leads to cooperating, it enables our being guided by God in goodness, thus allowing that goodness to come to fruition in forming our moral characters and good lives.

Paul holds that people can be called to respond to divine goodness through good news, the gospel, from God. He remarks: "I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith" (Rom. 1:16-17). Paul identifies the power of God with divine righteousness or goodness, in keeping with the previous passage from Exodus on divine goodness confronting Moses. The gospel, in Paul's thought, has God's goodness confront its hearers by placarding the divine goodness in Christ crucified and raised.

Paul thinks of the good news as God's initiative and ongoing effort toward human reconciliation to God in filial goodness. In this good news, God self-discloses with guided divine goodness through Christ, aimed at leading people to reconciliation with God in righteousness. Humans are thus confronted with a decision: to cooperate or not to cooperate with the divine filial effort. Responding with cooperation to the divine goodness on offer includes repentance and faith toward God. Doing so allows this goodness to come to fruition in an interpersonal relationship between God and humans over time. Human faith that includes trust in God is intended to mature in a way that deepens reconciliation with God, volitionally, morally, and intellectually. A continued response to God's goodness in cooperation advances such reconciliation, courtesy of increasing reception of the divine power of righteousness. Paul associates the latter power with the unique work of God's (and Christ's) Spirit among humans.

Some people testify to finding the self-giving disclosure of God and Christ in their experience, particularly in conscience. Paul holds that, courtesy of the preached good

news, it can be “near” to people, in their “heart” (including conscience): “The righteousness that comes from faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down) or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).’ But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:6-9). If the “heart” engages the conscience, Paul holds that the good news works on the human conscience, offering divine filial goodness aimed at human reconciliation to God. He thus reports that “it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). Paul has in mind divine moral attraction, not divine coercion.

An ongoing issue is whether we humans are *willing* to find God’s good news or other guided divine goodness in our experience. Perhaps not all humans are, and perhaps no human always wants to find it there. In any case, Paul holds that people sometimes withhold honor and thanks from God for divine goodness (Rom. 1:21), thus deciding not to cooperate with God or to welcome divine goodness. Jesus had offered related remarks about human failure to cooperate with the good news in his parable of the sower. He noted that such things as “the cares of the world, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things” can “choke” the good news, thereby disabling its power to renew people in cooperation with divine goodness (Mark 4:16-19). So, the success of God’s good news is not automatic. Humans can fail to allow divine goodness to come to fruition in cooperation with it; they thus can frustrate it, in various ways.

Following the book of Isaiah, Paul portrays God’s frustration and disappointment toward uncooperative humans, exhibited in this divine response: “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people” (Rom. 10:21; cf. Isa. 65:2). This is divine patience, rather than rejection, toward people choosing not to cooperate with divine value disclosures. It is patience arising from a divine desire for people to cooperate with the good news and its divine goodness on offer. What, however, underlies Paul’s assurance about the good news of guided divine goodness?

#### *PART V: Assurance Grounded*

Assurance can be either trustworthy or untrustworthy regarding the reality of what it supports, and not every assurance given to us is worthy of our trust. This consideration bears directly on any alleged assurance of divine reality or goodness as a basis for faith in God. A key issue: is the assurance grounded in a way that makes it trustworthy?

Faith in God can have a ground in direct divine assurance of God’s reality and goodness. In that case, *God* gives assurance to people by showing them, as with the divine self-disclosure to Moses in experience, God’s reality and goodness. This assurance, which we may call “moral assurance,” is given by God in an interpersonal manner that conveys God’s reality and goodness to an attentive person. We humans, however, do not initiate or control God’s giving assurance of or showing God’s reality and goodness, even if we sometimes mistakenly expect to do so.

P. T. Forsyth comments on the interpersonal basis of divine assurance:

The [assurance of faith in God] is a matter of direct personal contact and assurance.  
... That is, it is an assurance not simply mine as a person, but of my personality as

face to face with Another, and finally a communion with Him. It cannot be the relation of a person to an institution like the Church, nor to a group like an Apostolate, nor to a book like the Bible. The institution or book is valuable, but it is as a medium.<sup>23</sup>

The needed interpersonal contact, we have seen, must involve God's self-manifested moral character as intended guide, and that character makes the contact morally robust and challenging. God's guided goodness confronted and challenged Moses and Paul, and that kind of confrontation is a live option today, at least in conscience for suitably receptive people.

Suitable reception requires human cooperation with the divine moral challenge and support from guided goodness in experience. It thus has a volitional component in humans that exceeds their mere reflection on divine goodness. Assurance from God is to be received by humans in such volitional cooperation, thereby allowing divine goodness to come to its intended fruition as morally formative in a human life. So, it is not *just* a matter of divine power. God, as suggested, does not simply *make* people good or assured. Human responsiveness is a crucial part of the interpersonal mix.

We should expect God's assurance of divine reality and goodness to be dynamic and intermittent in human life, rather than static or inert. It ebbs and flows relative to God's redemptive purpose in relating to a human. Divine intervention thus could be occasional and even veiled in human experience, as God seeks to make contact at opportune times in a fruitful way, while avoiding counterproductive, promiscuous, or pointless contact at other times. Relative to divine intervention and human response, God would bob and weave toward humans, with divine hiding at times, for their own redemptive benefit.<sup>24</sup> A divine aim would be to challenge humans not to take God for granted, as just another dispensable object in their experience. In taking our attention away from guided divine goodness, we would remove our attention from God at work in our moral experience, and our assurance of divine reality and goodness could suffer accordingly.

Some humans fault or disregard God for not intervening as they prefer and thus for not complying with their desires for interaction. For instance, they sometimes expect a spectacular intervention by God that would remove their doubts, regardless of moral benefit.<sup>25</sup> In addition, they sometimes look for an argument for divine reality that would silence all dissenters, again regardless of moral benefit. If, however, God works at all in human experience, God does not work in those ways. God is more elusive and unpredictable than the scenarios some people recommend or endorse, even if some apologists for theism suggest otherwise. God seems not to be primarily concerned to remove human doubt about God's existence; the divine concern appears to lie elsewhere, primarily in moral matters of the human will. In all cases, God would self-disclose to humans at God's moral discretion, sometimes with purposes and timing puzzling and

<sup>23</sup> Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority*, 328.

<sup>24</sup> On the redemptive value of divine hiding at times, see Paul K. Moser, *Understanding Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 313-16, and Paul K. Moser, "Experiential Dissonance and Divine Hiddenness," *Roczniki Filozoficzne (Annals of Philosophy)* 69, no. 3 (2021): 29-42.

<sup>25</sup> For an influential example, see N. R. Hanson, *What I Do Not Believe and Other Essays* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1971), 322.

even frustrating to humans. This should be no surprise, however, given human limitations in knowledge of divine purposes.

An argument, however rigorous or compelling, would not give people direct interpersonal contact or assurance from God. Only God would be able to give that, because only God would control direct divine self-disclosure. John Oman adds: “The unfailing vision of God is the vision of His goodness. God in argument avails little. It will ... renew no will, enlighten no conscience. ... We cannot see the panorama of God’s glory, but we can live in the procession of his goodness. No distinction is more important in our knowledge of God.”<sup>26</sup> Direct awareness of a self-disclosure of God’s moral character, then, would differ from knowledge of an argument for divine reality. In addition, such awareness should not be confused with faith, as if faith were always veridical, suitably grounded, or self-authenticating. To avoid being arbitrary or ill-conceived, faith in God needs a ground in suitable experience of God.<sup>27</sup> Unlike faith, however, *God* can be self-authenticating to humans, owing to divine intervention with guided goodness in human experience.

Even if we count some effects of God (say, in the apparent order or the causal chains in the physical world) as “evidence” for God’s reality, such evidence does not give a direct contact, encounter, or assurance from God. There is a gap between such evidence and a direct contact, encounter, or assurance from God, because that evidence does not directly present God’s unique moral goodness inherent to being God. Nothing less than such manifested goodness will adequately indicate a God worthy of worship and thus serve as needed evidence. Anything less will leave us with an open but vital question: is *God* the source of this? Indeed, in the absence of evidence for guided divine goodness, a recommendation of agnosticism (as withholding judgment on divine reality) is a live option.<sup>28</sup>

The present concern about primarily informational approaches applies straightforwardly to arguments, beliefs, and principles regarding God’s reality or goodness. They do not directly present divine reality or guided goodness. Without direct contact with guided divine goodness, we will lack direct interpersonal assurance from God, because God’s unique moral character of goodness will not then be directly presented to us. We thus have given our previous attention to guided divine goodness, despite neglect of it in much inquiry about God. As we humans are not in a position to create such goodness, we should think of it in terms of something *presented, given, or disclosed* to us.

A unique, salient feature of guided divine goodness and assurance is God’s self-disclosure of enemy-love. Paul remarks that God’s love for us was at work before we welcomed God, even while we were “ungodly” and “enemies” of God (Rom. 5:6, 10). God’s guided goodness thus comes to (us as) enemies of God, who have no claim to merit it (cf. Rom. 4:2-4). Jesus worked with a similar assumption, regarding God’s

<sup>26</sup> John Oman, *A Dialogue with God* (London: James Clarke, 1950), 38-39.

<sup>27</sup> This lesson is missed by Donald M. Baillie, *Faith in God*, new edition (London: Faber and Faber, 1964 [1927]), 113-15, John Baillie, *The Sense of the Presence of God* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962), 64-65, and Alvin Plantinga, “Arguing for God,” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, third edition, ed. K. J. Clark (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2017), 104. John Baillie mistakenly characterizes trust in God as “self-authenticating” (73); the latter feature belongs to God, not to human trust. A more cautious approach is found in Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority*, 146-48. See also Moser, *Understanding Religious Experience*, 254-82.

<sup>28</sup> For the bearing of this consideration on familiar arguments of natural theology, see Paul K. Moser, “Natural Theology: A Deflationary Approach,” forthcoming in *Natural Theology: Five Views*, eds. James K. Dew and R. P. Campbell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023).

enemy-love as integral to God and being children of God: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous’” (Matt. 5:43-45; cf. Luke 6:35-36). Enemy-love, according to Jesus, is God’s unique signature, and Paul suggests a similar status for it (Rom. 12:9-10, 20-21; cf. Rom. 5:6, 10).

We have noted Paul’s talk of God’s love being poured by God’s Spirit into the hearts of receptive people (Rom. 5:5). This love includes enemy-love as the signature divine love, setting it apart from typical human love. As a matter of empirical fact, ordinary humans lack proficiency with enemy-love and even with promoting it, and the same is true of many historical candidates for the title “God.” Jesus, however, portrays God as distinctive in enemy-love, and thus we should consider God’s intervening Spirit to self-disclose divine love accordingly. When we have such love directed at us, at least at the start, it includes enemy-love, as suggested by Paul. It can prompt people to undergo change, however, from being enemies of God to becoming faithful children of God. They must cooperate with God’s moral character and will, but the basic motivating power is divine love of enemies. Paul thus remarks, as one who previously had opposed God’s Messiah: “The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). Such divine love reoriented and guided not only Paul’s theology but also his life, particularly toward the Gentiles.

Guided divine goodness in human moral experience is a matter of firsthand experience for some people. They do not rely on an argument to have such experience or to value it. Even so, they can reflect on it, and they can reason about it. In particular, as noted, they can ask if God’s guided goodness figures in a best explanation of their having the experience. If it does, they can point to a best available explanation involving God as relevant for inquirers about the status of their experience and of their corresponding faith. At least, they can offer this kind of explanation as fitting for their own experience and corresponding evidence, without claiming that everyone shares the same experience or explanation. Experience and evidence can vary in that manner. It does not follow, however, that the evil in their experience must similarly be assigned to God. We have plenty of other, human sources to account for the evil among and within us.<sup>29</sup> Hence, there is no easy analogy here that undermines the evidence in question.

### *Part VI: Two Contrasts*

We can put the position of this article in sharp relief by contrasting it with the positions of Martin Buber and H. Richard Niebuhr on faith in God and its ground. I shall show that they miss some important themes from Paul that figure in this article’s position.

Citing Romans 10:9, Buber characterizes the approach of Paul as follows: “The situation for Paul is that a [person] shall recognize Jesus with all the strength of faith to be the one whom he proclaims as the door to salvation. ... And this faith is a ‘belief that’ in

<sup>29</sup> It does not follow that we have, or should expect to have, a full theodicy that explains all of God’s motives in allowing the extensive evil in the world. For a neglected approach to theodicy, see Paul K. Moser, *Divine Guidance: Moral Attraction in Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), chapter 3.

the pregnant sense of the word, which is essentially different from the faith of the Jews that on Sinai a divine revelation took place, as it signifies the acceptance of the reality of an event."<sup>30</sup> The center of Buber's misgiving about Paul's approach to faith is that it signifies not "the acceptance of the reality of an event" (as on Sinai), but information ("belief that") about the resurrection of Jesus. On this ground Buber takes exception to Paul's approach to faith and its ground.

Buber, I suggest, overlooks what is central to Paul's understanding of faith and its ground: the distinctive experiential content, courtesy of God's Spirit, that is ineliminable from Paul's perspective on faith in God and its ground. This article has attended to that experiential content in terms of direct divine disclosure in self-manifested filial values that are, in Paul's language, "the fruit of the Spirit." Buber rightly highlights the importance of something beyond information to ground faith in God, such as experienced events, but he overlooks Paul's agreement with this theme. We have noted Romans 5:5 as particularly straightforward in connection with this theme, but other suggested passages from Paul confirm this reading. Romans 4, in addition, is clear that Paul thinks of faith as trust *in God*, even when no informational content is specified (Rom. 4:3; cf. 4:24). Buber therefore suffers from a misleading informational approach in his interpretation of Paul on faith and its ground. This article has countered such an approach on the basis of Paul's undisputed letters.

H. Richard Niebuhr has approached faith in God and its ground in a manner similar to some features of the present article's position. He speaks not of "the fruit of the Spirit" but of "theological virtues," as follows:

Theological virtues ... are given not as states of character but as relations to other beings and particularly as relations to God. They are given with and in the gift of the object toward which as actions of the self they are directed. Humility or thinking rightly of ourselves is given with the gift of God himself, and of the neighbors. The self does not think rightly or humbly of itself until God discloses himself in his majesty and graciousness and reveals the neighbor in his Christlikeness. Love is given with the gift of the lovely, the love-attracting; it is called forth by the gift of God himself as the supremely and wholly desirable good; by the gift of the neighbor, as the one beloved by God, as lovely, and as loving the self. Hereby we not only know love but conceive love, that God makes himself known in his beauty. ... Thus the theological virtues, or virtues insofar as they are theological, have the character of response rather than habits. As responses they are personal both on the side of the agent and on the side of the object, that is they are responses of a person to personal actions such as faith-keeping, love, promise.<sup>31</sup>

The position of the present article agrees with Niebuhr's view that the theological virtues are "relations to God" and "have the character of response rather than habits," and it has emphasized the role of morally relevant relations and response. I would qualify, however, talk of "habits" as talk of "mere habits," because a pattern of intentional response can yield good habits, on the basis of such a response. I also would propose, as suggested, that the

<sup>30</sup> Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, trans. N. P. Goldhawk (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 97-98.

<sup>31</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "Reflections on Faith, Hope, and Love (1953)," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 2, no. 1 (1974): 152.

“relations” in question do not require (*de dicto*) theological recognition from humans, given a robust *de re* status.

Niebuhr’s position on theological virtues differs from that of Paul on two noteworthy points. First, as we noted in connection with Romans 5:5, Paul explicitly identifies the key theological virtue of divine love as coming directly from God’s Spirit in a way that grounds hope and faith in God, thus removing disappointment about their evidential status. Niebuhr does not give due attention to this important lesson from Paul. His epistemology suffers as a result. Second, Niebuhr is less emphatic than Paul on divine intervention in a human’s moral experience without reliance on other humans. Niebuhr emphasizes the role of human social interaction in a manner different from Paul.<sup>32</sup> This is a complicated topic, beyond the scope of this article, but it does indicate at least a difference in emphasis between Paul and Niebuhr. The position of this article is closer to the emphasis of Paul, while acknowledging that social influence can be crucial to some cases of religious experience.

In his later work, Niebuhr refers to “the fruit of the Spirit” in terms of “emotions” and “feelings.”<sup>33</sup> He thus recommends that we think of the result of this fruit as “the emotional life redeemed,” adding the following: “the scriptures speak from feeling to feeling about the objects that elicit feeling and cannot be known without feeling.”<sup>34</sup> There is no reason to deny the bearing of the fruit of the Spirit on human emotional life. Paul thus links this fruit to “crucifying the flesh with its passions” (Gal. 5:24), and we may assume that the latter passions include emotions. Even so, we should avoid any suggestion that reception of the fruit of the Spirit is passive in the way many emotions and feelings are. This reception is typically volitional, involving the human will, and hence is irreducible to ordinary emotions and feelings. As a result, after characterizing the fruit of the Spirit, Paul remarks: “If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25). This injunction assumes a volitional role for humans in relation to the Spirit’s producing the fruit of divine righteousness in their lives. Any emotional role here is therefore joined with a key volitional role for humans, thus bearing on active human responsiveness and responsibility in relation to the relevant fruit. This theme fits with Niebuhr’s broader approach to the role of responsibility in theological ethics.<sup>35</sup>

### Conclusion

We now have a distinctive basis in human experience for faith in God, at least for some people. Guided goodness of a unique sort in experience can save such faith from mere speculation, and it can give it a ground and an assurance with existential value that motivates human living, including through conscience. The variability of such experience among humans precludes its being a hammer against outsiders, and that is a benefit. The God acknowledged by Paul does not need a hammer. Instead, the divine assurance

<sup>32</sup> For discussion, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), chapter 2, and James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1974), 152–55.

<sup>33</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Cole Lectures: ‘Next Steps in Theology’ (1961),” in Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, ed. W. S. Johnson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 41–42.

<sup>34</sup> Niebuhr, “The Cole Lectures,” 42.

<sup>35</sup> See Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, chapter 1.

comes, if at all, with uncoercive attraction by divine love, including enemy-love, in God's good time. It also shows divine patience when inquirers need more time or more experience and evidence. Human control fails here, but if God is morally impeccable, that is a gain, and no loss.

The approach on offer brings a new learning curve for inquirers about God, but the resulting interpersonal assurance for faith is well worth the adjustment. It enables God to have priority with grace not only in salvation but also in the assurance of faith that receives the power of salvation in guided divine goodness. Such priority is fitting for a God worthy of worship and trust. It is also fitting for humans with real needs in the areas of goodness and assurance. Candor about such needs can lead to new appreciation of guided goodness and faith's assurance, and it can contribute thereby to our responding to the problem of guided goodness and to our understanding of divine self-disclosure in filial values.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Thanks for helpful comments to referees for *Modern Theology* and to Aeva Munro, Ben Nasmith, and Tom Carson.