The Transformative Power of Accepting God’s Love

God’s love is a topic that has recently been embraced with renewed enthusiasm by philosophers and theologians alike.[[1]](#footnote-1) A less well-explored but complementary topic concerns what is involved in *accepting* or *receiving* God’s love. What is involved, we might ask, on the human side, in the activity of accepting God’s love? How might accepting or failing to accept God’s love make a difference for a person’s life? Could the potential benefits of accepting God’s love provide reason for a person to commit themself to God’s existence? These questions have received only scanty attention from philosophers of religion, usually only in narrow contexts often specific to Christianity.[[2]](#footnote-2) Yet they deserve broader exploration outside these narrow confines. They form the point of departure for this paper.

I begin in Section 1 by briefly developing a conceptualization of the patterns of attitudes and behaviors involved in accepting God’s love. On the account that I develop, accepting God’s love is something both believers and agnostics can do, or fail to do. Accepting God’s love, or rejecting it, is an activity performed on the human side of things. In the longer Section 2, I turn to the value of accepting God’s love, focusing on one way in which accepting God’s love can be transformative for the person who does it. I develop a conceptual and empirical argument for thinking that accepting God’s love can help a person cultivate moral virtues, thereby becoming a better person. Importantly, I argue that this transformative power isn’t only available for committed theists—it is available to agnostics as well. In fact, I present the results of an original secondary data analysis in partial defence of this specific conclusion. If I am correct about this transformative power of accepting God’s love, then there is significant reason for both believers and non-believers to accept God’s love. In Section 3, I explain how this fact can be used to generate a pragmatic argument for adopting positive cognitive commitments to God’s existence. Roughly, the idea is that agnostics have reason to cognitively commit to God’s existence, despite their unbelief, in order to reap the significant benefits of moral transformation afforded by accepting God’s love.

1. Accepting God’s Love

God, as traditionally conceived, is extraordinarily loving. On some accounts, God in some significant sense *is* love. On others, God is supremely or maximally or perfectly loving. When it comes to human persons, God is thought to intentionally and benevolently create a world in which they can live and thrive, and God allows these persons to come into existence and experience any good thing they experience. God attends to the affairs of every human person, understands every human person, cares for every human person, and wills for every human person to flourish. God loves each human person with a love that goes beyond the love any other person has for them.[[3]](#footnote-3)

 Yet, it is one thing for God to love a person, and another thing for that person to accept God’s love. Instead of accepting God’s love, a person could be unaware of God’s love, or could ignore or reject it or misconstrue it or refuse it. My focus here is on what is involved on the human side in this activity of accepting God’s love.

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

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

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

 My own preferred approach to conceptualizing what sort of cognitive commitment may be involved here is to be fairly liberal—more liberal than the quotation from Schellenberg would suggest. Recent work on the topic of faith (both religious and mundane) has highlighted that there may be many different kinds of positive cognitive attitudes other than belief. Assuming, assenting, or accepting may be distinct cognitive attitudes weaker than belief (Howard-Snyder 2013, 2019a,b). I want to suggest that attitudes such as these may suffice for the sort of positive cognitive attitude required for accepting God’s love.[[4]](#footnote-4) A person who assumes that God has benevolently allowed the good things in their life, or who accepts that God has done this or assents to God’s having done this, without adopting the stronger cognitive commitment of believing that God has done this, may satisfy the cognitive requirement I have in mind for accepting God’s love. Thus, an agnostic—someone who neither believes that God exists nor that God does not exist—may be able to satisfy the cognitive requirement for accepting God’s love. This point is one I will return to in the next section when discussing the transformative power of accepting God’s love, because I will argue there that this power may be operative in the lives of agnostics as well as believers.

 Returning to our present question about what is involved in accepting God’s love, we must recognize that the cognitive commitments highlighted above are not all that is involved. There are also affective elements. After all, even the person who believes in God but rejects God’s love may be cognitively committed to God’s having allowed each of the many good things in their life as an expression of love for them, and so on. It’s just that they repudiate this love from God, wish it didn’t exist, long to escape from it, oppose it.

 One of the main qualities such a person seems to lack in comparison to the person who accepts God’s love concerns their affections. They are negatively affectively oriented toward God’s love for them, rather than positively affectively oriented toward it. My suggestion, then, is that a second ingredient for accepting God’s love is that a person be positively affectively oriented toward this love. They must tend to experience positive emotions directed toward what they are committed to taking to be God’s love for them. They will tend, for example, to be joyful about and thankful for God’s bringing into their lives the many good things God does out of love for them. They will appreciate God’s attentiveness to them and understanding of them. They will be glad to be cared for by God.

 This kind of affective orientation is closely related to complementary desiderative and volitional orientations. The person who accepts God’s love not only experiences positive emotions directed toward God’s love for them, but they want God to love them, and they want to experience God’s love for them. They are motivated to enjoy and acknowledge God’s love for them. They try to express thanks for God’s love, and to show suitable affection in return toward God in response to the love they take God to have shown them.

 What I have described in this section is probably best thought of as an accepting orientation toward God’s love. A person who has an accepting orientation toward God’s love tends to cognitively commit themselves to God’s loving them in the ways traditionally ascribed to God; they tend to experience positive emotions as a result of these commitments; they desire to view things this way and have these experiences; and they are motivated to respond appropriately in reciprocating affection toward God for the love God has shown them.

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

Moreover, the thoroughness of a person’s acceptance of divine love also depends upon how many of the aspects of divine love they accept, and how accurately they grasp these elements. In my sketch of the aspects of divine love above I have been intentionally bare. I have tried to highlight elements of divine love that are among the least controversial. Yet, there are many who believe that, in addition to the elements of divine love I have highlighted, there are others. For example, many contend that God’s love for human persons includes loving emotions directed toward them, such as rejoicing when human persons rejoice and grieving when they grieve (see Mullins 2020). Others maintain that, in addition to being benevolent toward human persons, God also wills to experience interpersonal union with them (e.g., Stump 2018). If these are indeed aspects of God’s love, or if they would be aspects of God’s love if there were a God, then a person is more accepting of God’s love if their acceptance of God’s love includes acceptance of these elements, in addition to the others highlighted above.

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

1. The Transformative Power of Accepting God’s Love

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

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

 Yet, there are also ways that a person’s acceptance of God’s love may be valuable whether or not God loves them in the ways they accept. Some philosophers have argued that, for a person with (at least) roughly counterbalanced evidence concerning God’s existence, accepting God’s benevolent acts toward them can be valuable as a means to cultivating or maintaining certain virtues exemplifying giving others the benefit of the doubt. Tending to sincerely thank God for the good things God has brought about in one’s life can be part of an effort to develop or maintain a tendency to err on the side of thanking one’s benefactors more generally for the good things they contribute to one’s life (see Byerly forthcoming). We might think that, in a similar way, accepting God’s love more broadly can be part of an effort to err on the side of accepting others’ love for oneself in appropriate ways, and can be valuable because of this.

 There is a further particular value of a person’s accepting God’s love, available regardless of whether God does love them in the ways they accept, that is my focus here. I wish to argue that accepting God’s love is conducive toward developing or retaining moral virtue more generally. It’s not just conducive toward developing or maintaining certain narrow particular virtues exemplifying giving others the benefit of the doubt. It’s conducive more generally to developing or maintaining moral virtues.[[5]](#footnote-5)

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

 The indirect approach to virtue development I have in mind, which can complement the direct approach, instead focuses on removing certain kinds of obstacles to a person’s acting in accordance with virtue (cf. Porter and Baehr 2020). There are many temptations that lead us away from acting in accordance with virtue. If these temptations can somehow be neutralized, their power over us reduced through the “scaffolding” of our personalities (Snow 2013), then this could free us to act in accordance with virtue and thereby aid us in developing virtue. For example, in the case of generosity, we might be inclined to fear the loss of things we value, or to worry about embarrassing ourselves when we attempt to aid others with our gifts, leading us not to act generously. If our personalities can be shaped so that the influence of such fears and worries is minimized, we may thereby be better enabled to act in accordance with generosity, and so develop or maintain this virtue.

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

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

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

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

 This theoretical perspective is now supported by a wealth of empirical evidence. Attachment security is very important for personal development. Secure attachment is associated with higher needs for achievement, greater likelihood of adopting mastery goals, and weaker fear of failure (Elliot & Reis 2003). Secure attachment is related to greater curiosity (Mikulincer 1997), greater openness to new ideas (Bourne et al 2014), and less biased information seeking (Mikulincer 1997). Secure attachment is related to greater self-control (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004), greater attentiveness to one’s projects (Webster et al, 2009), and better planning and organization (Learner & Kruger 1997). All of these features are important for developing and maintaining virtues—they are precisely the sort of “personality scaffolding” we are looking for. Studies have also confirmed more directly the link between secure attachment and virtue. For example, securely attached individuals exhibit greater empathic concern, compassion, and altruism (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2015), and they are more forgiving, grateful, and humble than their insecure counterparts (Dwiwardani et al, 2014).

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

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

 If secure God attachment can play this role, then accepting God’s love can as well. For, accepting God’s love, as described in Section 1, is a large component, if not the entirety, of what researchers are measuring when they measure attachment to God.

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

It should be clear enough that someone who accepts God’s love in the sense identified in Section 1 would tend to respond to these items in the way a person with secure God attachment would. For example, given their tendencies to adopt positive cognitive attitudes toward God’s having shown love to them in various ways, they will tend to disagree with the idea that God seems to have little or no interest in their personal affairs. Their tendencies to respond to what they take to be God’s love for them with positive affect will lead them to regard their relationship with God as more warm, intimate, and emotional. And, the more thoroughly they accept God’s love for them, the less ambivalent they will be toward God’s love for them, leading them to disagree with the claims that they are very worrisome or fearful about their relationship with God. Accordingly, this research on God attachment supports the claim that accepting God’s love can play a significant role in indirect virtue development.

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

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

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

There is also complementary research on attachment to God with Jewish populations (Pirutinsky et al, 2019) which is, at least, suggestive of the potential significance of attachment to God for those without strong cognitive commitments to God. It’s not that Jews are agnostics, of course. But, rather, as emphasized by the researches who have conducted these studies, Judaism tends in empirically verifiable ways to downplay the importance of the cognitive dimensions of religion and upplay the importance of practice. Because Judaism downplays the importance of the cognitive in this way, researchers expected that attachment to God would not be significant for Jewish participants. But they found exactly the opposite. Attachment to God was significant for anxiety and depression in their participants. In the authors’ summary of their results, they write that these results appear to indicate that “attachment to God—as opposed to belief, faith, or even conviction—may be a unique internal variable [linking] religiosity and mental health” (167). Inspired by this analysis, my suggestion here is that, just as attachment to God has proven significant for Jewish populations for whom cognitive religious commitments are less central than for other religious participants, so too perhaps attachment to God may prove significant among at least some agnostic populations.

Thankfully, we can do more than rely on these suggestive studies that were not focused specifically on agnostic populations. While there has not yet been any published research focused exclusively on attachment to God in agnostic populations, there are some publicly available datasets containing data about God attachment among agnostic populations large enough to support statistically significant results. This data has not previously been analyzed—but it is available to be analyzed. Thus, I will conclude this section by presenting results from a secondary analysis of two datasets containing data about attachment to God within sizeable populations of agnostics. The analyses will provide further support for the claim that maintaining a secure attachment to God—and so accepting God’s love—is positively related to mental health for agnostics, and as such may contribute to indirect virtue development for agnostics.

**Study 1**

*Participants*

Data for this study were taken from Wave III of the Baylor Religion Survey (Dougherty et al, 2010). Of the 1,714 participants in this nationally representative survey, 150 responded to a question about their views about the existence of God with either “I have no opinion”, “I don’t know and there’s no way to find out”, or “I sometimes believe in God”. Because the present study focused on the relationship between God attachment and mental health, participants for whom there was incomplete data regarding God attachment or mental health were removed, leaving a sizeable pool of 116 participants.

*Instruments and Procedures*

Participants completed the Baylor Religion Survey instrument, which contains questions about a wide array of topics. The focus of this study, however, was on participants’ responses to questions about God attachment and questions about their mental health.

God attachment was assessed in this survey using the 9-item measure developed by Rowatt & Kirkpatrick (2002). Six items in this measure are used to assess avoidant attachment (α = .71), and three items are used to measure anxious attachment (α = .84). Secure attachment is operationalized as low anxious and low avoidant attachment.

To measure mental health, I summed participants’ responses to 17 questions about their mental health (α = .93). A similar approach was taken by Leman et al (2018) when they studied God attachment and mental health among believing participants in this iteration of the Baylor Religion Survey. Only, I used a wider range of questions about mental health than these authors. Examples of the questions included are “How many days during the past 30 days was your mental health not good?”, “During the past month, how often have you felt nervous, anxious, or on edge?”, “During the past month, how often have you felt that it is not safe to trust anyone”, and “During the past month, how often have you not been able to stop or control worrying?” Higher scores on the measure were indicative of worse mental health.

After computing scores for participants on these measures, correlations between avoidant God attachment, anxious God attachment, and mental health were examined.

*Results and Discussion*

Results indicated that anxious God attachment was significantly related to poor mental health for participants (r = .26, p = .005), while avoidant God attachment was not significant. This finding for anxious God attachment among these participants is comparable to the finding of Leman et al (2018) focused on believing participants (r = .23). Thus, this suggests that for both agnostics and believers, anxious attachment to God is positively related to poor mental health.

This finding is important when it comes to thinking about the potential role of God attachment for virtue development among agnostics. This study did not measure virtues, of course. However, as explained above, the suggestion I am making here is that secure God attachment facilitates virtue development indirectly, by removing impediments to virtuous behavior. The kinds of impediments identified above included various kinds of worries or anxieties. Thus, the fact that anxious God attachment is correlated with difficulty trusting others, anxiety, poor general mental health, and so on, provides some support of the hypothesis of this paper.

The support provided by this study is not as strong as it could be, though. This is because avoidant attachment was not significant for poor mental health. What this study, taken alone, suggests is that what matters for the agnostic is avoiding anxious attachment to God—not so much embracing secure attachment to God. Being securely attached to God is but one way of not being anxiously attached to God, since one can also have avoidant God attachment. Thus, to find more thorough support for the hypothesis of this paper, it is important to find evidence that avoidant attachment to God is also significant for virtue development for agnostics. With this in mind, I turn to Study 2.

**Study 2**

*Participants*

Data for this study were taken from the dataset of Study 2 of Njus and Sharmer’s (2020) study of God attachment and mental well-being. Of the 709 participants in this study, 120 claimed to be agnostics. This study focused on them.

*Instruments and Procedures*

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

Participants completed Beck and MacDonald’s (2004) 28-item measure of God attachment, with 14 items used to measure avoidant attachment (α = .86) and 14 items used to measure anxious attachment (α = .92).

Two aspects of mental health were measured in this study: depression and self-esteem. Depression was measured with the 10-item Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale Short Form (Cole et al, 2004), α = .85. Self-esteem was measured with the widely-used Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965), α = .93.

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

In order to compare groups of highly secure or highly insecure participants, insecure attachment was operationalized as scoring above the 60th percentile in either anxious God attachment or avoidant God attachment. Secure God attachment was operationalized as scoring below the 40th percentile in both anxious God attachment and avoidant God attachment. Groups of highly anxiously attached participants and highly avoidantly attached participants were also isolated and compared to highly secure participants.

*Results and Discussion*

A correlation table of the relationships between anxious and avoidant God attachment and depression and self-esteem is included in Table 1. Notably, while both avoidant and anxious attachment were negatively related to self-esteem and positively related to depression, only the relationship between anxious God attachment and depression reached a conventional level of statistical significance. The relationship between anxious attachment to God and self-esteem was near-significant. These correlations provide further support of the relationship between anxious God attachment and mental well-being among agnostics identified in Study 1.

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| **Table 1** |
| *Correlations Between God Attachment and Mental Health Variables for Agnostics* |
|  | Self-Esteem | Depression |
| Anxious God Attachment | -.16\* | .33\*\* |
| Avoidant God Attachment | -.07 | .01 |
| \*p < .1; \*\*p < .001 |  |  |

 Anova tests of the significance between group means provided evidence that it is not the mere absence of anxious God attachment that is important for agnostics. The presence of secure attachment and absence of avoidant attachment may be important as well. Anova tests revealed that the differences in means for depression and self-esteem between groups of securely and insecurely attached agnostics were both significant (p = .02 in both cases). When anova tests and Tukey HSD tests were conducted to compare groups of securely attached, avoidantly attached, and anxiously attached participants, the mean difference between anxiously attached and securely attached was significant (p = .01) for depression, the mean differences between anxiously attached vs securely attached and between avoidantly attached vs securely attached both approached significance (p = .06 in both cases), and the mean differences between anxiously attached and avoidantly attached groups were insignificant for both depression and self-esteem. This provides evidence for thinking that, at least among this sample of agnostics, it was not the mere absence of anxious attachment that was important for mental health, but the presence of secure attachment.[[6]](#footnote-6)

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| **Table 2** |
| *Mean Scores for Mental Health for Secure Theists and Different Groups of Agnostics* |
|  | Self-Esteem | Depression |
| Securely Attached Theists | 28.57 | 12.67 |
| Securely Attached Agnostics | 26.86 | 14.86 |
| Agnostics | 22.57 | 20.76 |
| Insecurely Attached Agnostics | 21.81 | 23.03 |
| Avoidantly Attached Agnostics | 21.6 | 22.4 |
| Anxiously Attached Agnostics | 21.55 | 25.82 |

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

*General Discussion*

Together, the results from Studies 1 and 2 provide support for the claim that secure attachment to God can function as a source of mental health and stability for agnostics, just as it can for theists. As such, secure attachment to God can contribute to agnostics’ efforts to develop or maintain virtues indirectly. A secure attachment to God, for both agnostics and theists, can remove impediments to virtuous activity such as those associated with poor mental health, and can thereby enable them to become or remain virtuous. To put it in the preferred idiom of the paper, accepting God’s love can provide agnostics, and not just theists, with an indirect means for developing moral virtues.

 The samples used in the research reported here are, of course, limited. It is possible that relationships observed between attachment to God and mental health in these populations of agnostics may differ from those observed in other populations of agnostics. Agnosticism may come in many varieties, and attachment to God may not function in exactly the same way for all varieties of agnosticism. Likewise, there may be moderators that impact whether or not attachment to God influences mental health for agnostics—a point I return to in the next section. These issues should be attended to in future research. Yet the studies presented here at least demonstrate that for some populations of agnostics, attachment to God can significantly impact mental health, and that is enough to support the claims of the present paper that accepting God’s love can enable virtue development for agnostics and not just theists.

1. A Pragmatic Argument from the Transformative Power of Accepting God’s Love

Suppose, as argued in Section 2, that accepting God’s love can enable a person to develop or maintain moral virtues, whether they are a theist or an agnostic. It this is true, it’s very good news. It’s good news because research suggests that most of us are not virtuous, and have a good way to go to become virtuous (see Miller 2015). Moreover, not a lot is known about effective strategies for becoming virtuous (Miller 2017, chs. 7-9). Most of us are in need of all the effective strategies for becoming more virtuous we can get, and should welcome the identification of an additional one.

 Given the transformative potential of accepting God’s love, together with the need most of us have for moral transformation, we have the makings of a pragmatic argument for cognitively committing oneself to God. Namely, there is reason to cognitively commit oneself to God’s existence as part of accepting God’s love, in order to thereby increase one’s chances of developing moral virtues and becoming a better person.[[7]](#footnote-7)

 As I am developing this argument here, I mean to address it to the agnostic. The believer is already cognitively committed to God’s existence, and so doesn’t need this argument for committing to God (though they might need an argument for accepting God’s love). The atheist may not be capable, psychologically, of accepting God’s love, as their disbelief in God is in too much tension with adopting the positive cognitive commitment to God’s existence required by accepting God’s love (cf. Howard-Snyder 2013 on the tension between disbelief and faith). It’s the agnostic, then, for whom this argument can have purchase. Moreover, I have in mind the epistemically rational agnostic: the agnostic for whom suspension of belief is an epistemically justified attitude for them to take toward God’s existence. While they reasonably suspend belief regarding God’s existence in advance of considering the argument, it may be that the argument could persuade them to adopt belief in God, or to adopt a weaker cognitive commitment such as assuming God exists, in order to accept God’s love and thereby potentially reap the benefits of indirect moral transformation.

This argument from the transformative power of accepting God’s love will have more purchase for the agnostic who recognizes that they are not virtuous and are in need of strategies to become more virtuous. For agnostics who are already virtuous, the argument will have little appeal. Yet, for those who are not virtuous, or who are only, say, barely virtuous and still have a good deal of room for moral improvement, the argument provides them with reason to cognitively commit to God, despite their unbelief, in order to experience moral growth.

The argument may be especially compelling for agnostics who do not already have several highly secure attachment relationships in their life—to mother, father, friends, etc. This suggestion receives some empirical support from what is called the “compensation hypothesis”. According to this hypothesis, individuals raised in a household with non-believing caregivers are more likely to themselves become believers if they are insecurely attached to their caregivers (for a review, see Granqvist 2020). The theory is that they turn to God, at least in part, in order to make up for attachment deficits. Similarly, here the suggestion is that an agnostic may find the attachment-related advantages of accepting God’s love to be especially compelling if they have been insecurely attached in important human relationships of theirs, and as a result may commit themselves to God’s existence despite their unbelief in order to reap these important benefits.

For agnostics who, by contrast, do already have secure attachment relationships with other human persons, the addition of a further secure attachment to God may advance their indirect development of virtues only incrementally, and so the argument here may have less appeal. Yet, it is worth recalling the point made above that there is strong evidence that, at least in the case of theists, secure attachment to God remains a significant correlate of better mental health when controlling for other secure attachments. At least for theists, secure attachment to God appears to contribute uniquely and additionally to mental health and indirect virtue development beyond what is contributed by other attachment relationships. We might suspect that the same may be true for agnostics. This is an area where further empirical research is needed, however.[[8]](#footnote-8)

 This pragmatic argument for religious commitment differs in important ways from some others, and avoids difficulties facing some others. It does not focus on the eschatological future or on benefits only available if God exists, as some other pragmatic arguments do. Rather, its focus is on benefits of moral transformation available in the here and now, and available whether or not God exists. It may be that benefits of this kind are even greater if God exists than if God does not, but my main focus in this paper has been on benefits that appear to accrue independently of whether God exists.

Nor is this pragmatic argument particularly susceptible to objections based on the idea that it motivates cognitive commitment to God on the basis of unacceptable reasons. After all, as excuses (or justifications) go, “I did it because I wanted to be a better person” is pretty good. And this needn’t be the only reason one acts on for accepting God’s love. One may also do this because one hopes this love is there to accept, reasonably thinks it may well be there to accept, and thinks that accepting it if it is there would be valuable in the ways highlighted at the beginning of Section 2. It’s just that the addition of this further reason concerning conduciveness to virtue development might tip the scales for some, in an appropriate way, leading them to accept God’s love when they otherwise might not have.

We might wonder whether it is epistemically disvaluable to allow these moral reasons to tip the scales in this way. I offer two brief replies to this question.[[9]](#footnote-9) First, there are two reasons for thinking that adopting the relevant commitments would not be epistemically disvaluable. First, the commitments, as indicated in Section 1, may be relatively weak cognitive commitments, such as assumptions. As such, it may be that they are either not subject to epistemic evaluation, or the threshold necessary for them to be epistemically permissible is not as high as it is for other cognitive attitudes, such as full belief. Second, even if the commitments are evaluated with the same epistemic criteria as full beliefs, there are several increasingly fashionable accounts of epistemic justification that would permit the moral values attainable via adopting these commitments to reduce the threshold for epistemic support necessary for them to be epistemically justified (e.g., Riggs, 2008; Pace, 2011; Rinard, 2017). Thus, in one of these two ways, it may be that the commitments are not epistemically disvaluable. Moreover, second, even if they are epistemically disvaluable, it is plausible that the moral values attainable via adopting them will trump the epistemic disvalue of adopting them, in much the way that has been suggested in other discussions where adopting a cognitive commitment promises moral value at the potential expense of epistemic value (cf., e.g., Stroud, 2006; Preston-Roedder, 2013).

 As in the case of other pragmatic arguments, the target audience for this one might struggle to know how to adopt the commitments the argument recommends. How, if I find myself not believing in God, can I accept God’s love, thereby cognitively committing myself to God’s existence and God’s love for me? A major challenged alleged against pragmatic arguments for belief in God focuses on this kind of issue. It seems that belief in God is not under our direct voluntary control, and that if an agnostic were to attempt to induce such belief indirectly, they would be deceiving themself (cf. Jordan, 2018, sect. 7).

Yet here if not elsewhere, it seems there is a sensible way forward in response to this objection, given the way that accepting God’s love is characterized in Section 1 of this paper. To accept God’s love, one needs only to act on assumptions about this love, responding in fitting ways as if this love is present, offering thanks and displaying appreciation for this love. The cognitive commitments necessary for accepting God’s love in this way may be fairly minimal. As assumptions or other cognitive attitudes in their near vicinity, they are of a sort to be much more subject to a person’s voluntary control. Much as a the defensive captain of a football team might be perfectly capable of making assumptions about what type of play the offensive team will call, and indeed often must make assumptions one way or the other about this (Howard-Snyder 2013), likewise a person may be perfectly capable of assuming that God loves them, and may have to make assumptions one way or the other about this in order to guide their behavior. In making such assumptions about God’s love, one needn’t deceive oneself about the quality of one’s evidence. One may recognize, just as the defensive captain does, that the evidence doesn’t strongly favor the assumption one is making, yet also justifiably judge that making this assumption is the right move given its significant potential benefits.

One somewhat unique objection facing the present pragmatic argument has to do with the idea that it promotes treating God as a kind of “crutch”. The criticism that religious belief acts as a kind of psychological crutch for believers has a venerable history, and is commonly associated with Freud and other advocates of wish-fulfilment explanations of religion (for a review, see Guthrie, 2006). For Freud, religions are “born from man’s need to make his helplessness tolerable” (1964: 25). Applied to the present case, the idea might be that for an agnostic to accept God’s love in the way recommended by the argument would require that this acceptance be motivated, in a problematic way, by their need for secure attachment.

To have much of a bite, a criticism of this sort needs to specify what is problematic with the agnostic’s accepting God’s love out of this sort of motivation. After all, a defender of the argument grants that this is their approach. The language of using God as a “crutch” is meant to be pejorative, however. What is needed is a way of explaining what is undesirable about it.

In one of very few articles in philosophy of religion written on this topic, Angelo Juffras (1972) points a way forward for how the details of this sort of criticism might be developed. Juffras’s discussion is focused on criticisms of using “theology” as a crutch, but much of what he has to say could be applied to using relationship with God as a crutch. In attempting to get clear on what is objectionable to using theology as a crutch, he writes, “Presumably, the opponents of theology wish to train man to a higher state of virtue” (256). Either using theology as a crutch tends toward the development of vice, or it tends away from the development of virtue. Clarifying which virtues might be involved, Juffras writes, “When theology is disparaged as a crutch, this also suggests what is approved, viz. self-sufficiency” (ibid). Thus, one might take the objection to be that, if the agnostic accepts God’s love in order to boost their mental health and thereby be in a position to become a better person, they are failing to be self-sufficient; they are succumbing to too strong a dependence on God in their pursuit of virtue. They are acting contrary to the virtue of autonomy.

I would suggest, however, that this criticism may be met, or at least largely blunted. This is for two reasons. First, recent research on the virtue of autonomy has strongly suggested that, when properly understood, autonomy should not be thought to involve a strong reluctance toward relying on others. Rather, it involves a reflective and attentive reliance upon others. This is especially clear in work on the virtue of intellectual autonomy in particular. Lorraine Code was an early critic of modern ideals of autonomy which she claimed unduly privileged self-sufficiency (1991). For her, these ideals of self-sufficient agents represented a “perversion of autonomy” (2006). In a similar way, Roberts and Wood (2007), in their discussion of the virtue of intellectual autonomy, argue that virtuous autonomy “involves a wise dependence” on others (258). Indeed, they go so far as to suggest that the autonomous person “sees his indebtedness [to others] as a good and fitting thing, not at all second-rate or to be regretted” (258). Similarly here we might propose that the virtue of proper autonomy does not demand that the agnostic shies away from depending on God to fulfil their needs for secure attachment, but is compatible with their accepting God’s love reflectively and wisely given their understanding of themselves and the potential values that accepting God’s love may hold for them.

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

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

There are two points I think should be kept in mind in response to this sort of objection. First, we should note that, at least with respect to some candidates for alternative attachment figures, a person’s evidence concerning their existence and love is likely to be significantly lower than their evidence regarding God’s existence and love. This is likely the case for the Tooth Fairy, and for the loving inanimate object. If indeed the person’s evidence for these entities significantly disconfirms their existence, then they will not serve well as alternative attachment figures. Either the person will believe they don’t exist, and this disbelief will prevent them from accepting love from these figures, or they will irrationally suspend belief or even believe in these figures, thereby impugning the value to be gained by accepting love from them. Thus, accepting God’s love appears a better option than accepting love from these potential substitutes.

The second point is that, even if accepting love from some of these kinds of potential substitute attachment figures would in fact contribute to a person’s mental health in much the way that accepting God’s love would, this may not imply that accepting God’s love too is not also justified. Take the case of ancestors, for example. Perhaps some people are in an evidential position that justifies them in taking an agnostic stance toward the existence of loving ancestors. An argument that parallels the one of this paper might be developed in favor of accepting love from these ancestors in this case. I would concede that such an argument may have purchase for people in this evidential situation. Perhaps they indeed should accept the love of their ancestors, and doing so may boost their mental health and indirectly enable them to develop virtues. This needn’t imply that accepting God’s love is not also justified, however.

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

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

 It must be granted, of course, that there will sometimes be reasons for agnostics *not* to accept God’s love, despite its conduciveness to moral transformation. Sometimes other affairs of life legitimately will take precedence. Gladly acknowledging the love God has shown you and responding affectionately may need to wait if your child has just been seriously injured and you are justifiably consumed with helping them. Yet, it is important to emphasize that accepting God’s love is often a fairly low-cost activity. It doesn’t cost all that much to engage in the cognitive, affective, desiderative, and volitional activities outlined in Section 1. They can often be practiced, even, while a person is engaged in doing many other things of importance.[[10]](#footnote-10) As such, it is unlikely that over the course of a complete life, a person who remains an agnostic for a significant period of time will continually be in a situation where it is not all-things-considered worthwhile for them to accept God’s love. The pragmatic argument from the transformative value of accepting God’s love, then, should have some persuasive power for many agnostics, leading them toward acting in acceptance of God’s love and toward developing an accepting orientation toward God’s love.

1. Conclusion

This paper has focused on the topic of accepting or receiving God’s love. I first identified several of the central features of accepting God’s love, proposing that this involves adopting certain positive cognitive, affective, desiderative, and volitional orientations toward God’s having loved one in ways traditionally ascribed to God. I then argued that accepting God’s love in this sense has potentially transformative power for the one who does it. Specifically, it can enable a person to indirectly develop moral virtues, thereby becoming a better person. Moreover, it can do this, I argued, both for theists and for agnostics. My case for thinking that accepting God’s love has this transformative power was based on existing psychological research on attachment, including attachment to God, and on my own original secondary data analysis of two datasets containing data about attachment to God and mental health among agnostics. I concluded the paper by explaining how these facts about the potentially morally transformative power of accepting God’s love can form the basis of a pragmatic argument for committing oneself to God’s existence that may have appeal to many agnostics. Committing oneself to God’s existence in the way necessary for accepting God’s love may be a reasonable thing for many agnostics to do as part of an effort to accept God’s love and thereby experience indirect growth in moral virtue.

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1. A recent example that charts some of this interdisciplinary uptake of interest in divine love is (Wessling 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Two recent examples are (Porter and Rickabaugh 2018) and (Stump 2018). Both of these discussions focus on accepting God’s love as part of the Christian process of sanctification. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These claims about God’s love toward human beings are intended to be fairly minimal, and thus to be widely accepted. There are many controversies about other features of God’s love, and I return to some of these below. For a discussion of the less and more controversial features of God’s love that confirms the minimal nature of the claims made here about God’s love, see (Wessling 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I’m not alone. In fact, one important response to Schellenberg’s hiddenness argument stresses this kind of point about how attitudes weaker than full belief can facilitate relationship with God (see Poston and Dougherty 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. My focus is on the conduciveness that accepting God’s love may have for virtue development whether or not God exists. But I acknowledge that accepting God’s love may be *even more conducive* toward virtue development if God does exist. For example, if God does exist, it may be not just the psychological acts of accepting God’s love that play a role in virtue development, but God may take an active role in helping those who accept God’s love to develop virtue, as suggested in (Porter forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It is important to stress here the fact that the differences in means between anxious and avoidant groups were not significant for depression or self-esteem. Thus, what makes a difference for the agnostic is whether they are securely attached to God versus having one of the insecure attachment orientations toward God. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Of course, one might also develop an argument of this sort based *just* on the fact that accepting God’s love is conducive toward mental health. This argument wouldn’t require the commitments the present argument does to the conduciveness of mental health to virtue development. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. One way to address this question is to compare mean scores for mental health for a group of agnostics who have secure attachments to other attachment figures but not to God with a group of agnostics who have secure attachment relationships to both other attachment figures and to God. Attempting to carry out this analysis with the samples used in the studies reported in this paper led to groups with too few members for meaningful comparisons to be made, unfortunately. While participants in the latter group did tend to score slightly better on the mental health measures used, the small number of participants examined prevented these differences in mean scores from reaching conventional thresholds for statistical significance.

 Another source of evidence for thinking that God attachment is uniquely significant for mental health for agnostics can be provided by multiple regressions, in which other attachment relationships are controlled. Yet, this technique is best employed in order to examine whether avoidant or anxious God attachment individually are uniquely significant for mental health. Multiple regressions with the participants from Study 2 revealed that anxious God attachment remained a significant correlate of depression when controlling for other attachments, while avoidant God attachment was not significant for mental health on its own. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. These responses are modelled on (Byerly forthcoming), to which I direct readers for a fuller discussion of such issues. Jordan (2018) also discusses similar responses in more detail. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. My main focus in the text is on the low cost of engaging in *acts* of accepting God’s love, which I am taking to be conducive toward developing or maintaining an accepting orientation toward God’s love. How much it costs to develop an accepting *orientation* toward God’s love, on the other hand, will differ from person to person, and may be considerably more costly to develop for some than engaging in acts of accepting God’s love is. I would imagine, in particular, that it may be challenging to alter a deeply entrenched anxious attachment to God.

There is only a very small psychological literature at this time concerned with interventions for enhancing God attachment security. One intervention that has recently proven effective involved a six-week practice of brief, daily self-hypnosis (Williams et al 2020). While the language of “hypnosis” may sound alarm bells for some readers, it turns out that the actual practice of this activity as described by the researchers is not so different from a daily diet of acting in the way recommended in the text here, with particular focus, relaxation, and imaginative engagement. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)