

Real Atheology & Emerson Green: Responding to IP on the Meager Moral Fruits Argument

[Inspiring Philosophy's thread](#)

List of relevant studies:

[Oppy on virtue and religion](#)

[Love thy Neighbour... or not: Christians, but not Atheists, Show High In-Group Favoritism](#)

[The Psychology of Nonbelievers](#)

[What Makes You So Sure? Dogmatism, Fundamentalism, Analytic Thinking, Perspective Taking and Moral Concern in the Religious and Nonreligious](#)

[Religion, cognitive style, and rational thinking](#)

[Analytic atheism: Valuing epistemic rationality strengthens the association between analytic thinking and religious disbelief](#)

[Atheists and Agnostics Are More Reflective than Religious Believers: Four Empirical Studies and a Meta-Analysis](#)

[Modeling the Effects of Religious Belief and Affiliation on Prosociality](#)

[Anti-Atheist Bias in the United States: Testing Two Critical Assumptions](#)

[Meta-analyzing intelligence and religiosity associations: Evidence from the multiverse](#)

[Cross-cultural support for a link between analytic thinking and disbelief in god: Evidence from India and the United Kingdom](#)

[Nonreligiosity and Life Satisfaction: Reexamining a Supposedly Negative Relationship](#)

[The Meager Moral Fruits Argument](#)

There are three moving parts of the MMF argument, so critiques of the argument will tend to fall into one of three categories: criticism of the theological premise, the empirical premise, or the moral premise.

The Theological Premise, roughly speaking, is the claim that Christianity should bear moral fruit.

The Empirical Premise is meant to establish some relevant fact about the world.

The Moral Premise affirms a moral fact or normative judgment.

Not all versions of the MMF argument will follow the pattern of defending a theological, empirical, *and* moral premise. I think a theological and empirical premise are both essential to the MMF argument, but the moral premise isn't *always* there. (For instance, in Real Atheology's version of the MMF argument explored below.) One might defend a theological premise along the lines of "Christianity does not predict that Christians would be indistinguishable from non-Christians," and an empirical premise like "Christians and non-Christians are not appreciably different in their conduct and character." So there's no moral premise in that argument, even though it's still recognizably a meager moral fruits argument. However, every MMF argument will involve a theological and empirical claim, explicitly or implicitly. Pushback against the argument will typically involve a rejection of the theological, empirical, or (if it has one) moral premise.

IP appears to be pushing back on the empirical premise, albeit in a rather unusual way. (More on this in a moment.)

On the Person-Based Nature of Justification

Something I think many fail to understand is the person-based nature of justification. There's no such thing as a justified belief in the abstract. Something is justified *to* someone. We can't abstract justified beliefs from persons, since we can't abstract beliefs from those who hold them. Consider the fact that different persons can have different justifications of differing quality for the same belief. So, is that

belief justified or not? One person might be justified, the other might be unjustified, even if it's the very same belief. There is no belief that's simply "unjustified," entirely abstracted from the person who holds that belief.

Furthermore, we each find ourselves in different epistemic contexts. As Joe Schmid puts it,

"Whether one is justified in accepting an argument is a function of a whole concoction of factors that are individual-specific: one's priors, one's expectations on various hypotheses, one's seemings, one's life experiences, the books and articles and videos one has watched, one's body of testimonial evidence, etc. We each occupy a unique position on the 'grand epistemic landscape.'"

Inspiring Philosophy raises a question midway through his thread pertaining to epistemic disagreement. What if it seems to one person that P, but it seems to another person that Q?

Why this has any special significance to the MMF argument is unclear. We all occupy different positions on the grand epistemic landscape, and this is not unique to the subject of meager moral fruits. Since we're all working with different seemings, life experiences, books and articles and videos, testimonial evidence, and so on, our disagreement does not expose some kind of fatal flaw in the MMF argument. It can be rational for one person to believe that P and another to believe that Q – neither need be irrational.

The fundamental epistemological principle I'm working with here is that of phenomenal conservatism: if it seems to S that P, then S is rational in believing that P in the absence of defeaters.

With that in mind, here's a claim: Mr. Rogers was a nice guy.

How would you go about proving that? What if someone demanded scientific evidence that Mr. Rogers was a good guy? I think I'm justified in believing Mr. Rogers was a kind person, even though I've provided no scientific evidence, no quantitative results, no double-blind, randomized trials that support it. I happen to think that's perfectly fine. It would actually be pretty weird to demand scientific, quantitative evidence for a claim like "Mr. Rogers was a kind person."

Now, imagine a world in which everyone makes a similar judgment about Christians as we do about Mr. Rogers. Just as everyone familiar with Mr. Rogers

comes to a similar conclusion about his status as a good person, it would likewise be common knowledge that Christians are wonderful people. *Unusually* good people. They *noticeably* stand out from non-Christians. Everyone knows it, like everyone knows that Mr. Rogers was a nice guy.

So, would we then have some evidence for Christianity? I say yes. It would be very surprising if the one true religion produced unusually immoral followers, while false religions produced better people. One wouldn't expect false religions to produce the same effects as the one true religion. So, if one religion in particular produced noticeably better followers, that could be taken as evidence favoring that religion.

Here's another way of putting this: Christianity makes certain predictions, and these predictions diverge from those of naturalism. The nature of Christian theism leads one to form expectations as a result of what I've been calling "the theological premise." If those predictions work out, and they don't clearly follow from naturalism in the way that they clearly follow from Christian theism, then we would have evidence favoring Christian theism relative to naturalism.

Doubting the Empirical Premise

IP seems to be questioning the empirical premise of the argument. He's in good company. Paul Draper has also grown skeptical of the empirical claims of MMF arguments, though on grounds quite different from IP.

In [Draper's 1997 debate with William Lane Craig](#), Draper argues that the [meager moral fruits of theism](#) are evidence favoring naturalism over theism. Here is a summary of that argument provided by [Jeff Lowder at Secular Outpost](#):

The moral fruits of theism are meager at best: theists do not seem to live more moral lives than atheists. Neither church history nor Draper's personal experience support the claim that theists are morally superior to atheists. On the assumption that theism is true, one has reason to believe that theistic belief has significant moral fruits, that worshipping God is a source of moral strength. Thus, on the assumption of theism, the fact that theists do not seem to live more moral lives than atheists is surprising. On the assumption that atheism is true, however, this is not surprising. On atheism, believing in God would not make people morally better.

As I mentioned, Draper is less likely to use this argument these days, since he believes that we have insufficient sociological data to establish meager moral fruits as a fact. Since we're lacking sufficient information, he thinks the empirical claims of his argument can't be asserted with any real confidence.

To this, I have three main responses. The first is that we *do* possess some good supporting evidence for the claim that theists do not seem to lead more moral lives than atheists. Graham Oppy, in his book *The Best Argument Against God*, considers some relevant sociological data:

Often, proponents of particular religions claim that followers of the religion in question are morally superior to those who do not belong to that religion. . . . How might we decide whether it is true that Theism is more conducive to virtue than Naturalism? Well, we can compare societal data from countries with a higher percentage of Theists (and a lower percentage of Naturalists) to countries with a lower percentage of Theists (and a higher percentage of Naturalists). If Theism really does conduce more to virtue than Naturalism does, then we should surely see patterns in the societal data that reveal greater virtue in countries with a higher percentage of Theists and a lower percentage of Naturalists.

Consider, then, the data in the following table (taken from www.nationmaster.com):

	Ireland	US	Australia	Denmark
Weekly Church Goers	84%	44%	16%	5%
Abortion (per 'average woman' over lifetime)	0.18 (estimated from recorded Irish abortions performed in England)	0.69	0.57	0.48
Burglary (per capita)	1.98	0.714	1.530	1.318
Murder (per 100,000)	1.3	9.1	1.2	1.1
Rape (per capita)	0.4	0.4	1.0	0.4
Suicide (per 100,000)	2.2	2.2	2.1	2.2
Assault (per 100,000)	2.4	1.2	2.4	1.2
Divorce (per 1,000)	0.83	4.45	2.52	2.81
Imprisonment (per 100,000)	0.99	7.15	1.16	0.72
Teen Birth Rate (per 1000 girls)	not recorded	64	21	10
Below Poverty Line	5%	12 %	4 %	12 %
Obesity (per capita)	13%	31 %	22 %	10 %
Smoking (daily)	25 %	17.5 %	19.8 %	28 %
Alcohol (litres/year)	13.5	8.3	9.8	11.5
Software Piracy (as % of all software used)	not recorded	20%	28%	25%

...what we see in this table is what we see in every set of data of this kind that I have seen – for example, in the data presented in standard demographical textbooks, or in the data presented in the Britannica Year Book, or in the data presented in Wikipedia, and so on – namely, that there is nothing in the data that supports the claim that increased national religiosity is correlated with increased national virtue. When we look at a broad range of indicators of personal and societal dysfunction, countries with relatively low levels of religiosity – such as Denmark and Australia – do not score worse than countries with relatively high levels of religiosity – such as Ireland and the United States. . . . there is nothing in the data about societal dysfunction that confirms the superior moral virtue of Theists or Naturalists.

Graham Oppy (2013)

I think Oppy presents us with a good way of evaluating the empirical claim of Draper's MMF argument (namely, that theists do not seem to live more moral lives than atheists).

Additionally, I think Draper is being excessively skeptical here. There is never a point at which we will have collected *all* the relevant data, *every* line of evidence, every observation that could bear on the question at hand. We'll always be working with a frustratingly incomplete data set. I don't see why that should be of any special significance here. We just have to remain non-dogmatic and update our credences when new observations are made and new data come in. Just because there's a degree of ambiguity doesn't necessarily mean we should withhold judgment!

For those who agree with Draper now that we can't use the version of the argument Draper has used in the past, why not just make a new version of the argument? Just as every other argument for theism or for atheism has many different versions, so can MMF. We can offer a modified version of the argument that doesn't rely on making empirical claims about how the entire population of non-theists compare to the entire population of theists.

So those are three responses to Draper's skepticism about this argument (that he was responsible for putting on the map). I'd like to return now to the second point raised — that we are in a position to compare theists and non-theists.

Draper himself rejects skeptical theism on the grounds that appeals to the unknown cut both ways. They cancel out, so we should just evaluate what we do know. There may be relevant considerations, unknown to us but known to God, that would dramatically alter our perception of the evils in the world and whether they were justified. But that exact point could be invoked to opposite ends: maybe there are unknown reasons that make the suffering of our world even worse than we thought it was! We should just stick with what we *do* know and evaluate the evidence we actually have available to us, since appeals to the unknown cancel out and leave us where we started with our actual observations.

I'm suggesting that we apply this same strategy to the empirical claims of MMF arguments. There are surely relevant considerations of which we are unaware, but why assume they all favor theism? Maybe the fruits of theism are even more meager than we knew! Appeals to the unknown cancel out and leave us where we started: weighing our actual observations. In order to make an argument from evil, one doesn't need to claim to be directly familiar with every single instance of evil

in the world, or to have an exhaustive taxonomy of every kind of evil and intimate knowledge of the causal web in which evil is embedded. Just as we are dealing with our limited knowledge of evil when we make arguments from evil, so we are dealing with our limited knowledge of Christianity's tenuous relationship with the good when we're making the argument from meager moral fruits.

I can see where Draper is coming from, assuming he wants the MMF argument to have the same objective force as the argument from hiddenness or his argument from the biological role of pain and pleasure. But I think there's nothing wrong with the argument being more person-specific. You may not be in a position to make grand claims about the behavior of all Christians or all theists as a group. No one is in that position. But the object of the MMF argument need not be so lofty. We can judge the character of Christianity based on what knowledge we do have about Christianity. Any individual person is in a position to assess their own experiences, make judgments according to their own base of knowledge, which includes the books, articles, videos, debates, etc. that one has seen, and is well within their epistemic rights to come to conclusions on the basis of the evidence available to them at that time. In fact, that's what we're all doing, all the time. Maintaining that we can't form a judgment on the moral fruits of Christianity or theism just because we don't have *all* the relevant evidence is a standard that we don't hold in other areas! We don't have all the relevant evidence about fine-tuning, either as a philosophical community or as individuals. Have you read every notable paper and book about fine-tuning? Do you think human beings are currently in a position where we can make absolute judgments about the nature of fine-tuning? There's nothing wrong with an individual forming a judgment about MMF just as there's nothing wrong with a person forming a judgment about fine-tuning despite their limitations. You don't know *everything* about christian history, sociology, and so on, but you do know some things. (This is bound to be more person-specific than other arguments, but I don't see why that should dissuade one from including MMF in their personal considerations over whether or not they personally should be religious.) We each find ourselves where we find ourselves on the epistemic landscape, and forming judgments given what we know, even though we don't know everything, is obviously permissible. It's inevitable that everyone listening to or reading this – regardless of your religious persuasion – will have to make moral and empirical judgments based on your unique position on the grand epistemic landscape.

Even so, there's still a sense in which the MMF argument can be objective. My favorite version of the argument begins with the claim that Christianity, if true, should not be an obstacle to the pursuit of the good for oneself and others. There are two other moving parts to the argument: the empirical claim and the moral

claim. For simplicity, take the example of LGBT rights. It's a historical fact that the Christian community writ large was (and to some extent still is) an obstacle to LGBT equality. That's an easily substantiated empirical claim. Then, there's the more contentious moral claim that LGBT equality is a moral good, which many Christians to this day will not accept. So, the empirical claim, moral claim, and the theological claim – that Christianity, if true, should not be an obstacle to the pursuit of the good for oneself and others – allow us to objectively judge the evidence. Those three moving parts need to be in place. But anyone can see that *if* they are in place, the argument clearly goes through.

Responding to IPs Twitter Thread

Before we run through a brief response to Inspiring Philosophy's Twitter thread, it's important we understand the specific version of the MMF argument that is being put forward:

- I. If Theism is true, we'd expect God to put Saints and positive witnesses into the lives of Atheists
- II. Most Atheists do not experience positive witnesses or Saints.
- III. Said fact is surprising on Theism, but not on Naturalism.

As noted above, this argument is *not* meant to be decisive against Theism, rather it's supposed to be an *evidential chip* that favors Naturalism. We would not consider this a weighty argument for Theism like we would Sobel and Draper's Humean Bayesian Arguments from Evil. What can we say on behalf of the argument? First we have data showing that a significant number of Atheists have poor experiences with Theists. For example, [a 2018 Barna study](#) found that when looking at the reasons why people choose Atheism, Christian Hypocrisy was cited among the top reasons for all demographic groups. The results of a [new survey](#) conducted by the Episcopal Church further illustrate that Atheists see Christians in a negative light.

On the other side, Dr. Jana Harmon, who does research on the psychology around conversion has noted that a disruptive witness can play a [key role](#) in moving someone from Atheist to Theist:

“a Disruptive Witness catalyst occurs when someone’s preconceived presumptions about God, Christians, or Christianity are countered in an embodied and/or intellectual way. This could be through direct personal interaction (embodied witness), when a nonbeliever actually meets someone who disarms or diffuses their negative stereotypes. They may be pleasantly surprised when they actually meet a normal, loving, intelligent Christian who lives out and/or thinks through their beliefs in a significant way.”

She provides an example of this in action:

“High school history teacher Frank Federico (Ep. 6) wanted nothing to do with God or Christianity. Belief in God was irrelevant and untrue. Christians were unintelligent and weird. He enjoyed his moral autonomy and thought science and religion could not be reconciled. Frank unexpectedly met a winsome, intelligent Christian science teacher who disrupted his preconceived categories. This unforeseen positive encounter was the catalyst that began his intellectual search towards truth and a complete life change.”

To summarize we can see that many Atheists have poor experiences with Theists/Christians, and yet an encounter with a positive witness can be a potential factor in conversion. Given this, we would expect (on Theism) to see more Atheists experience positive witnesses and the fact that we don’t is surprising on Theism.

Inspiring Philosophy’s [first point](#) seems to try to offer a symmetrical argument from the perspective of a Theist. As discussed above, this point seems to ignore the nature of person-based justification when it comes to the evaluation of our personal experiences and how they inform our position on the epistemic landscape. On the Theistic hypothesis, there is an expectation that God would want a relationship with human beings and would do all he could to facilitate that relationship. Therefore the experiences of Atheists relative to believers is important, because this plays a role in their potential relationship with God. Again we want to go back to the Theological premise here, which supports the expectations we’re forming on the Theistic hypothesis.

The second response is to point out that *there are* Theists who have made the opposite claim relative to Inspiring Philosophy’s symmetrical argument, namely that the poor experience of believers has pushed away Atheists. For example, Bishop Robert Barron, a leading Christian Apologist, [notes](#) in a lecture that he experienced worse vitriol from his fellow Catholics than the New Atheists during the course of his work on evangelization. In another video, Bishop Barron [notes](#) that the laity have failed to answer the universal call to holiness and remarks how society would change dramatically if they did so. Christian Apologists Cy Kellet and Matt Nelson both [agree](#) that many Christians aren’t doing a good job of

making their faith attractive. These are just a few examples, but the point should be clear. Even according to some Theists, Christians/Theists are not meeting the standards they should and that this is impacting evangelization in a negative manner.

Inspiring Philosophy's [second point](#) is that because Atheists can be dogmatic & biased, this can cloud their judgement and therefore their personal testimony on the moral fruits of believers is not reliable. While the crux of this point is responded to in the section above *On the Person-Based Nature of Justification*, it's still worth noting that Inspiring Philosophy's point is unclear. What are the limits of the dogmatism being cited here? Does this mean that testimony of Atheists can't be trusted *at all*? In the [video](#) that Inspiring Philosophy cites he even [notes](#) that he doesn't think the data proves that Atheists are more naturally biased than theists, which seems to tell against his earlier claim. The proponent of the MMF argument can easily concede that Atheists are subject to bias just as everyone else, but it's not exactly clear how this weighs against the argument, or specifically the personal experiences of Atheists with believers.

It also is worth noting that with regards to the [study](#) that Inspiring Philosophy cited, one of the co-authors has published a more recent study in 2021: [The psychology of nonbelievers](#) that seems to tell against Inspiring Philosophy's original claims. The study notes: *Nonbelief relates to open-minded and analytic thinking styles, which likely interacts with cultural influences.* The study further notes that nonbelievers may hold prejudicial attitudes just like everyone else but *this has some limits*. A second study published in 2016 titled [Atheists and Agnostics Are More Reflective than Religious Believers: Four Empirical Studies and a Meta-Analysis](#) also seems to contrast the data that Inspiring Philosophy is citing. We want to be very clear with what we're saying. We are *not* saying that Atheists are definitely more reflective or open-minded. Rather, we are saying what proponents of the MMF argument have always said: the data on this issue is complex, mixed, and that it is hard to make outstanding judgements one way or the other.

Inspiring Philosophy also [cites](#) a study showing that Atheists and agnostics in academic biology display bias towards Christians. Again it's not clear what the upshot is. As Inspiring Philosophy probably knows, Atheists and nonbelievers are among the discriminated groups in the US and face a [good deal](#) of prejudice. Many of this prejudice comes from Christianas as well. For example a recent article [Love thy Neighbour... or not: Christians, but not Atheists, Show High In-Group Favoritism](#) which outlined several notable conclusions:

- Atheists were significantly more disliked than any other religious group.

- Atheists rated Christians, Buddhists, Jews, and Hindus as favorably as they rated their own atheist in-group, but rated Muslims less positively (although this effect was small).
- Christian theists showed pronounced in-group favoritism and a strong dislike towards atheists.
- No evidence could be found to support the contention that atheists are hostile towards religious groups in general, and towards Christians specifically, although this may have been a Type II error. If atheist groups do dislike religious groups, then this hypothetical dislike would be significantly smaller in magnitude than the dislike directed toward atheists by Christians.

This research seems to contrast what is presented by Inspiring Philosophy. Again our position is not to say that one or the other is definitively correct on this, but rather that this is a complex issue. And just as it would be wrong for us to use the above research to challenge the reliability of Inspiring Philosophy's assessments on Atheism due to the high levels of prejudice that Christians display towards Atheists, it seems similarly wrong to use the bias that Atheists display to reject the reliability of the testimony we've provided.

In the rest of the [thread](#), Inspiring Philosophy turns his attention to focus on considerations related to the empirical premise. These considerations are addressed in detail above. Again we want to stress the complexity of these findings and that in putting forth this argument, we are not taking the view of the New Atheists, namely that "*religion poisons everything*". As *Friendly Atheists*, we believe that Theism is a rational, reasonable, and intellectually serious worldview, and we believe that Theists can be rational in their belief in God. We also are very grateful for many of our theist colleagues who inspire us daily. However, we believe that due to some of the considerations offered here, the MMF argument is still valid and still needs to be addressed.