

The Attribute-Expectation Test

Divine Love, Human Accessibility, and the Reasonableness of Demanding Public Clarity

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Revised August 2026

Central claim

The charge that critics are “expecting too much” reverses the burden. Perfect love, unlimited power, complete knowledge, and a human-directed desire for relationship are substantive claims only if they make accessible and intelligible communication more expected. A reply may qualify those expectations, but it cannot protect every contrary observation through mystery without emptying the attributes of public content.

Preview:

Attribute claim	Expected public pattern	Observed pressure	Rational burden
Perfect love, full knowledge, unlimited power, and desire for human relationship	Broad access, intelligible disclosure, and low dependence on accident of birth	Sincere nonbelief, cultural clustering, doctrinal fragmentation, and retrospective rescue	Supply independently supported constraints, revise the attributes, or lower confidence in the target God-concept

The test is comparative and defeasible. It does not infer atheism from one disappointed expectation; it asks whether the total public pattern is more expected under the specified God-concept than under live rivals.

Visual preview:

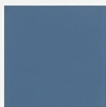
The Attribute-Expectation Test: Do Divine Claims Match Reality?

The ‘Attribute-Expectation Test’ posits that religious claims are not just honorific titles but predictive hypotheses. If God is described as perfectly loving and all-powerful, it is logically reasonable to expect a world characterized by clear communication and universal accessibility rather than ambiguity and hiddenness.

THE LOGIC OF PREDICTION

Attributes are Predictive, Not Decorative

Assigning a trait to an agent creates a public expectation of their behavior.



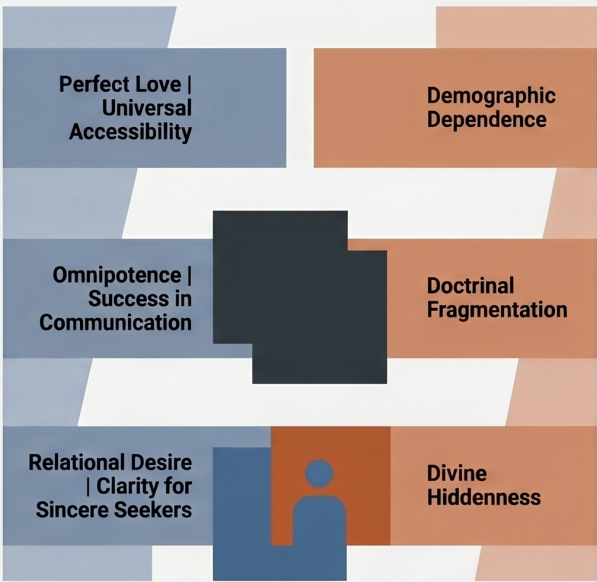
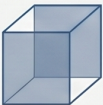
The Standard of ‘Perfect Love’

A human-focused God should be more accessible than a human institution.



The Requirement of Clarity

If a deity demands obedience, its commands must be unambiguous to all.



THE EVIDENTIAL PRESSURE

Expected Patterns vs. Observed Reality

The test compares divine attributes against demographic clustering and doctrinal fragmentation.



The Risk of ‘Honorific’ Language

If attributes explain no specific patterns, they lose their public meaning.



The Mystery Trap

Over-reliance on ‘mystery’ to explain failed expectations empties the attributes of content.



The image follows the paper’s diagnostic sequence: divine attributes generate predictions; the public world supplies comparison data; and explanations must preserve, rather than dissolve, the contrast. The central blue expectations are pressured by the orange observations. The right column shows the failure condition: if every outcome can be absorbed by “mystery,” the attributes become honorific praise rather than testable descriptions.

Abstract

Critics of a loving, omnipotent, omniscient, human-focused personal deity are often told that they expect too much clarity, accessibility, or response. This paper argues that the rebuke gets the direction of accountability backward. The expectations do not originate in skeptical entitlement. They are generated by the divine attributes themselves. If those attributes have descriptive and explanatory content, they must make some public patterns more likely than alternatives do. Perfect love combined with a desire for relationship predicts available contact; complete knowledge removes ordinary misunderstanding; unlimited power removes ordinary communicative inability; and high claimed stakes strengthen the expectation that sincere people can identify the message and its source.

The paper develops an attribute-expectation test that compares public data under a specified God-concept and live rivals. Durable nonresistant nonbelief, strong demographic dependence, doctrinal fragmentation among sincere interpreters, and indefinitely revisable accounts of unanswered communication jointly create evidential pressure. The argument is probabilistic rather than deductive: it does not assign invented numbers, treat every absence as decisive, or infer atheism from hiddenness alone. It asks whether the observed pattern is less surprising without the target attributes and whether proposed auxiliary explanations were independently supported, predictively constrained, and proportionate before they were used as rescues.

Freedom, soul-making, purposive evidence, implicit relationship, human resistance, and cognitive limitation are serious replies. Each can explain some cases. None earns an unlimited exemption. If the attributes remain vivid when recruiting trust but become indeterminate whenever the world conflicts with their predictions, the language is operating one way: thick for devotion and thin for criticism. The bounded conclusion is not that every form of theism is false, every nonbeliever is sincere, or public evidence is the only possible evidence. It is that “expecting too much” is no answer until the defender explains why the theology’s own maximal attributes should produce so little stable public constraint.

Keywords: divine hiddenness; perfect love; accessibility; public evidence; likelihood; nonresistant nonbelief; religious demographics; doctrinal fragmentation

1 The Theology Writes the Test

“You are expecting too much” is an unusually convenient reply. It can be used against demands for clearer revelation, more reliable prayer, less doctrinal confusion, wider access, or a recognizable answer to sincere seeking. The rebuke sounds like humility because finite people should not presume to dictate the methods of an unlimited intelligence. Yet it quietly relocates the source of the expectations. Critics did not invent perfect love, omniscience, omnipotence, universal concern, or desire for relationship. These are descriptions supplied by the theology. Once offered as reasons for trust, worship, obedience, or hope, they also become claims about how reality should tend to look.

That conclusion is not peculiar to religion. Attributes constrain expectation everywhere. Calling a physician competent makes successful diagnosis more expected than incompetence does. Calling a parent attentive makes responsiveness more expected than indifference does. Calling an institution transparent makes stable public explanation more expected than secrecy does. None of these predictions is exceptionless. A competent physician can miss an unusual case, an attentive parent can be temporarily absent, and a transparent institution can protect legitimate confidences. The point is comparative: the attribute changes the probability of recognizable patterns. If it changes nothing, it explains nothing.

This paper applies that ordinary discipline to a specified *God-concept*: a conception of a personal deity described as perfectly loving, completely knowledgeable, unlimited in relevant power, interested in relationship with humans, and capable of intentional communication. This is not a label for every form of theism. A distant creator, an impersonal ultimate, a finite deity, or a deity indifferent to human relationship generates different expectations. The target is the robust personal conception invoked when believers promise that the deity loves people, seeks them, guides them, commands them, or makes relationship available.

The governing thesis is sharp. The charge of excessive expectation reverses the burden because the theology itself supplies the standards. A defender may revise the attributes, narrow their scope, identify competing aims, or offer independently supported reasons for selective hiddenness. What the defender cannot rationally do is present maximally rich attributes as evidence of divine worth and then treat those same attributes as predictionless when counterevidence appears. That maneuver is not humility. It is insulation.

The governing test

For each attributed feature, ask what public pattern it makes more expected, what observed pattern bears on that prediction, what live rival predicts the data better, and what evidence independently supports any proposed exception. If no possible observation could count against the attribute claim, the attribute is no longer functioning as a public explanation.

The argument is related to, but broader than, Schellenberg’s influential case from nonresistant nonbelief (Schellenberg 1993; Schellenberg 2005a; Schellenberg 2005b). Schellenberg asks whether perfect love is compatible with the absence of belief needed for relationship. Drange develops a related argument from nonbelief, while McKim emphasizes religious ambiguity more generally (Drange 1998; McKim 1990). The present test does not depend on one deductive premise about what perfect love must always do. It asks a prior evidential question: once a cluster of attributes is affirmed, which public patterns should become more or less expected? That formulation can register cumulative pressure even when no single case is logically incompatible with the target God-concept.

2 Attributes Are Predictive or Merely Honorific

An attribute can serve at least three roles. It can be *descriptive*, identifying how an agent tends to think or act. It can be *explanatory*, helping account for observed events. Or it can be *honorific*, expressing praise or group allegiance without placing the world under recognizable constraint. The roles may overlap. Trouble begins when devotional language presents an attribute as descriptive and explanatory while criticism is answered as if the term had only honorific force.

Consider perfect love. The paper does not assume that love is a stance-independent moral property written into the universe. Its reasoning is internal and conditional. If a community describes its deity as perfectly loving and uses *love* in a recognizable sense to attract trust, then the community has supplied a preference structure: relationship, care, truthful communication, and responsiveness matter within that conception. The test asks what follows from those stipulated priorities when they are combined with complete knowledge and unlimited relevant power. A moral non-realist can make this comparison without appealing to objective moral facts. The question is whether the described agent’s alleged conduct coheres with the values and aims attributed to it.

Nor does the test presume that ordinary logic or induction is an unsupported foundation. We rely on consistent inference because it has repeatedly improved prediction, exposed contradiction, enabled correction, and coordinated successful action across domains. That record is fallible and revisable, but it is evidence. The same demand for reasons should apply to theological inference. “Mystery” cannot be granted a foundation-level exemption while ordinary methods are required to display their performance.

Table 1 states the minimal evidential role of the principal attributes. The predictions are tendencies, not exceptionless laws. Their force comes from the cluster. A loving but weak agent may fail; a powerful but ignorant agent may miscommunicate; a knowledgeable but indifferent agent may remain silent. The target God-concept removes those ordinary explanations simultaneously.

These expectations are modest in one important respect. They do not require a nightly spectacle, a voice audible to every person at once, or certainty immune to every possible doubt. There is a vast design

Table 1: How the target attributes constrain public expectation.

Attributed feature	What it removes	Defeasible public expectation	What would create pressure
Perfect love and relational desire	Indifference to whether capable persons can respond	Sincere, nonresistant people are normally able to identify the inviter and begin relationship.	Durable sincere seeking without adequate access
Complete knowledge	Accidental ignorance of each person's language, history, trauma, and evidential needs	Communication can be fitted to the recipient without misdiagnosing confusion as resistance.	Systematic mismatch between sincere recipients and claimed disclosure
Unlimited relevant power	Ordinary limits of distance, timing, medium, and institutional reach	Adequate access need not depend heavily on geography, birth, literacy, or one fragile chain of transmission.	Strong cultural clustering and historical exclusion
Human-directed commands or high stakes	Lack of concern about whether the message is identified correctly	Core requirements and their source should be more stable than peripheral disputes.	Persistent disagreement about salvation, authority, and required response

space between coercive display and the actual degree of religious ambiguity. Human communicators already use redundancy, translation, confirmation, adaptive teaching, independent channels, and error correction. An omniscient and omnipotent communicator would not be restricted to the least reliable features of human transmission.

The defender may still claim that other aims justify restraint. That is a legitimate move only after those aims are specified. An exception with content says when hiddenness should occur, for whom, for how long, and what compensating pattern should appear. A universal solvent says only that some unknown reason might exist. The first competes as an explanation. The second prevents learning.

3 From Maximal Attributes to Public Expectations

3.1 Perfect love and available relationship

Schellenberg's central insight is relational: a perfectly loving personal deity would be open to relationship with every finite person capable of it, subject to that person's resistance (Schellenberg 1993). Belief that the other party exists is not the whole relationship, but it is normally a gateway to intentional, reciprocal relationship. One may benefit unknowingly from an anonymous donor; that is not yet the same as knowingly responding to the donor.

The attribute-expectation test uses a weaker premise than a strict universal. It need not claim that perfect love logically entails explicit belief at every moment. It claims that perfect love plus relational desire makes broad, durable, and appropriately tailored accessibility more expected than indifference or nonexistence does. If there are sincere, capable people who remain unable to identify the alleged inviter after extended inquiry, the pattern requires explanation. One apparent case may be misdescribed. A broad and persistent class is harder to dismiss.

The qualifier *nonresistant* matters. No argument should infer from all nonbelief to failed openness. Some people avoid inquiry, reject unwelcome implications, or protect identity. Believers do the same. The evidential datum is that at least some nonbelief appears to persist among people who report openness, invest serious effort, understand the options, and would welcome well-supported contact. No human observer can infallibly inspect every motive, but ordinary inquiry never requires such access. We assess sincerity defeasibly through conduct, testimony, cost, consistency, and comparison. To declare every counterexample resistant merely because the target God-concept predicts no counterexamples is circular.

3.2 Knowledge, power, and communicative competence

Ordinary communication fails for familiar reasons: the speaker does not know the audience, lacks time, chooses the wrong medium, cannot reach a remote recipient, or is constrained by competing obligations. The target deity allegedly lacks those limitations. Complete knowledge includes each person's vocabulary, cognitive capacities, developmental history, fears, distortions, available evidence, and likely misunderstandings. Unlimited relevant power includes the ability to communicate through multiple channels without relying on one language, era, institution, or temperament.

This combination raises the baseline. A message directed to all humanity should not be assessed as though it were a damaged ancient notice produced by a fallible committee. If the actual method yields mutually incompatible interpretations among sincere and competent readers, communicative limitation is not available as the default explanation. Either the message was not intended to settle the disputed matter, other aims override clarity, the human-directed scope is narrower than advertised, or confidence in the proposed source should fall.

The comparison with human institutions is not meant to place an unlimited mind under bureaucratic rules. It exposes an asymmetry in claimed capacity. Emergency systems, schools, courts, and public-health agencies are fallible, yet they deliberately build redundancy and repair into urgent communication. Their success is imperfect but recognizable. If a deity knows every failure in advance, wants a specific response, and possesses vastly greater means, then a world in which basic religious access is less stable than ordinary public notice is not the natural expectation.

3.3 High stakes strengthen rather than weaken the prediction

Many traditions attach enormous consequences to recognizing revelation correctly: reconciliation, salvation, obedience, communal identity, or avoidance of grave error. Those stakes do not prove that any disputed message is divine. They alter what the communicator would be expected to do, given the communicator's alleged concern. A loving, capable agent who intentionally places great weight on a response has stronger reason to make the identity and terms of the invitation accessible, not weaker reason.

This point is independent of objective moral realism. It follows from the target God-concept's own stated concern for relationship and response. A defender may deny that the stakes depend on explicit belief, or may endorse universal postmortem opportunity. Such revisions reduce one form of pressure. They also change the theology. The popular combination of urgent belief requirements, unequal access, and perfect love cannot be protected by moving between those positions without acknowledging the cost.

4 Four Families of Public Pressure

No single data family carries the whole case. The force is cumulative because the same God-concept is asked to explain multiple, partly independent patterns. Table 2 summarizes the comparisons before the sections below examine their limits.

4.1 Nonresistant nonbelief

The literature disputes both the existence and the relevance of nonresistant nonbelief. Poston and Dougherty argue that subtleties about belief and relationship complicate Schellenberg's case; Cuneo questions the underlying account of admirable love (Poston and Dougherty 2007; Cuneo 2013). Those objections matter. They show why a probabilistic formulation is preferable here. The test does not require a perfect census or the claim that every loving relationship begins with explicit doctrinal assent. It asks whether the apparent amount, duration, and distribution of sincere nonbelief are more expected under a universally relationship-seeking deity than under alternatives.

Table 2: Public data and their evidential relevance.

Data family	What is observed	Why it pressures the target	Needed caution
Nonresistant nonbelief	Some informed, capable, apparently sincere seekers remain unconvinced.	A relationship-seeking, fully informed deity could tailor adequate contact to each person.	Sincerity is fallibly assessed and some nonbelief is resistant.
Demographic dependence	Religious belief and identity track family, location, and historical transmission.	Access appears governed by ordinary social inheritance rather than universal personal availability.	Clustering alone does not identify every cause or settle total probability.
Doctrinal fragmentation	Sincere adherents disagree durably about source, authority, salvation, and practice.	A human-directed message with high stakes should yield greater core convergence.	Some disagreement is expected under human limitation and some topics may be left open.
Retrospective rescue	Silence and contrary outcomes are repeatedly reclassified after the fact.	An explanation compatible with every result ceases to discriminate the attribute claim from rivals.	Flexible prediction is not automatically empty if the flexibility is independently constrained.

Evidence of sincerity is imperfect but not zero. Long-term inquiry, willingness to incur social loss, engagement with opposing arguments, correction of one’s own mistakes, and stated openness all count. A theological theory that discounts every such sign because the person remains unconvinced has made belief itself the sole test of sincerity. That guarantees the theory’s prediction but does not test it.

4.2 Demographic dependence

Maitzen argues that the uneven geographical distribution of theistic belief creates a distinct hiddenness problem because ordinary cultural causes appear to explain the pattern well (Maitzen 2006). Marsh replies that a Molinist account—one invoking divine knowledge of what free persons would do in alternative circumstances—may soften the inference (Marsh 2008). More recent work continues the dispute over whether mutual epistemic dependence, such as learning through communities and testimony, explains the distribution or merely relocates the question of why access was designed to depend on those channels (Blanton 2025).

The measured conclusion is comparative. Cultural transmission is a strong predictor of religious identity and concept formation. That does not show every religious experience is reducible to culture or that no person crosses traditions. It means that the public distribution looks substantially like a world in which human institutions transmit competing religions. A deity intending universal personal access could use social learning, but then the resulting exclusions, distortions, and clusters require a reason. The social mechanism is not automatically an answer to the design question.

4.3 Doctrinal fragmentation

Fragmentation is sometimes treated as irrelevant because disagreement follows from human freedom and limitation. Some disagreement certainly does. Yet its evidential significance depends on the message’s claimed purpose. If the alleged source intentionally leaves a topic open, diversity is unsurprising. If the source commands a response, ties it to high stakes, inspires a canonical message, and knows every interpretive outcome, durable disagreement about the response is evidence about communicative success.

The relevant disagreements are not merely peripheral. Traditions divide over the conditions of salvation, the identity and authority of revelation, sacramental requirements, the scope of punishment, divine sovereignty, the status of other religions, and the evidential role of experience. Sincere, learned

participants appeal to the same texts and report guidance toward incompatible conclusions. One may explain the variation through sin, institutional incentives, cognitive limits, deliberate ambiguity, or a pedagogy that values plural inquiry. Each proposal makes different further predictions. Simply observing that humans disagree does not explain why the chosen revelation method was expected to produce this degree and kind of disagreement.

4.4 Retrospective rescue

Prayer and guidance claims illustrate a wider problem. A request may be answered immediately, answered later, answered differently, answered spiritually, refused for a greater purpose, or met by silence that itself becomes an answer. Any one interpretation may be reasonable in context. The evidential defect appears when no possible pattern can lower confidence in the claim that responsive guidance is occurring.

Flexible theories are not automatically meaningless. Weather models allow ranges; medical predictions depend on patient variation; personal relationships involve context. These theories remain informative because they specify mechanisms, rates, boundary conditions, and failure criteria. Theological flexibility needs comparable discipline. If successful outcomes display care while failures display mysterious care, the attribute receives credit without risk. The label *love* then reports loyalty to the interpretation, not a pattern learned from the world.

5 Likelihood, Not Invented Certainty

The attribute-expectation test is naturally expressed with likelihoods. Let T be the target God-concept, R a live rival, and E an observed public pattern. Evidence E favors T over R when E is more expected if T is true:

$$P(E \mid T) > P(E \mid R).$$

If the inequality runs the other way, E pressures T relative to R . This is the same comparative structure used in evidential arguments elsewhere in philosophy of religion (Draper 1989). It does not require anyone to announce a precise probability for divine love or to pretend that complex social data can be reduced to one clean statistic. Directional comparisons can be rationally informative when exact magnitudes are unavailable.

Contrast classes matter. The negation of one God-concept contains many possibilities: naturalism, deism, finite theism, an indifferent creator, a deity with different aims, and rival religious conceptions. The paper does not assume that all predict the same data. Its basic claim needs only one serious rival under which the joint pattern is less surprising. Naturalistic cultural transmission, for example, readily predicts dependence on family, geography, institutional history, cognitive variation, and contested texts. It does not guarantee the exact world. It offers a mechanism with a recognizable fit.

The proper conclusion is an update, not a disproof. Posterior confidence depends on prior confidence, the strength of the likelihood comparison, background information, and other evidence. A strong independent case for T may survive adverse hiddenness evidence. But survival is not the same as immunity. If E is less expected under T , rational confidence in T should be lower than it would have been without E , unless other evidence offsets the pressure.

Auxiliary hypotheses complicate every test. Let A be a proposed explanation—perhaps freedom, soul-making, or purposive revelation. Then the defender compares $P(E \mid T \wedge A)$ with rivals. That move is legitimate. The danger is overfitting: inventing A only after observing E , allowing it to explain every possible outcome, and giving it no independent support. A disciplined auxiliary hypothesis should meet at least four conditions:

1. **Independent motivation:** reasons for A do not consist solely in its ability to protect T from this datum.

2. **Specificity:** *A* states which hiddenness is expected, for whom, under what conditions, and with what limits.
3. **New consequences:** *A* predicts further patterns that can be checked rather than merely redescribing what occurred.
4. **Proportionality:** the proposed good or constraint explains the amount and distribution of hiddenness, not just the possibility of one case.

This is not an anti-theological rule. It is the ordinary price of explanation. Scientific, historical, and interpersonal theories also lose force when adjusted without constraint. The target God-concept does not become more credible by being granted weaker standards than its rivals.

6 The Strongest Escape Routes

The hiddenness literature is not a collection of slogans. Howard-Snyder and Moser assemble diverse and sophisticated responses, and Plantinga and Alston develop influential accounts on which religious belief may have warrant through experience or properly functioning cognition rather than public argument alone (Howard-Snyder and Moser 2002; Plantinga 2000; Alston 1991). The attribute-expectation test must therefore ask what each major route genuinely explains and where its burden remains.

Table 3: Major explanations of hiddenness and the constraint each still owes.

Reply	Legitimate insight	Remaining burden	Failure mode
Freedom and noncoercion	Clear existence evidence need not produce love or obedience, but some manifestations may distort response.	Explain why noncoercive, recipient-sensitive access is unavailable or worse across the observed range.	Treating belief, allegiance, and coerced conduct as one attitude
Soul-making and epistemic distance	Difficulty can develop inquiry, humility, persistence, and character.	Predict which degree and distribution of distance optimize those aims and what growth should follow.	Assuming every unproductive absence is pedagogically necessary
Purposive or morally demanding evidence	Disclosure may invite transformation rather than provide neutral information alone.	Explain why adequate source identification would obstruct rather than enable informed transformation.	Making receptivity a condition for recognizing the agent to whom receptivity is owed
Implicit or de re relationship	A person may respond to values or goods without possessing a correct description of their source.	Show that the relevant relationship satisfies the theology's claimed aims and belief conditions.	Relabeling ordinary goodness as hidden relationship without discriminating evidence
Sin and resistance	Some nonbelief is motivated, avoidant, or culpably protected.	Account for apparently sincere cases and explain the demographic distribution of alleged resistance.	Defining all nonbelief as resistance because perfect love predicts no sincere nonbelief
Mystery and cognitive limitation	Finite agents should expect some inaccessible reasons if an unlimited mind exists.	Supply local, bounded uncertainty without making every possible observation equally compatible.	Converting absence of an explanation into evidence that an unknown explanation exists

6.1 Freedom is not a blanket explanation

Murray's coercion concern gives a serious reason why the target deity might avoid certain overwhelming manifestations (Murray 1993). The inference from that possibility to pervasive ambiguity is too fast. Knowing that another person exists does not force affection, trust, obedience, or relationship. Clear

awareness frequently sharpens the possibility of informed rejection. Even if some displays would manipulate or overwhelm, complete knowledge and unlimited power imply a huge space of less coercive alternatives: calibrated experiences, repeated private confirmation, independent public markers, context-sensitive communication, and clearer correction of sincere misunderstanding.

The defender must therefore identify the threatened freedom precisely. Freedom not to believe the speaker exists is different from freedom not to love the speaker. If relationship is the stated aim, preserving ignorance of the inviter is a peculiar method unless that ignorance serves some further independently supported purpose.

6.2 Soul-making must predict more than difficulty

Epistemic distance can contribute to development. Inquiry may cultivate patience, intellectual humility, mutual dependence, or resilience. Yet hardship is not automatically educational, and unequal hardship is not automatically optimized. Some ambiguity deepens reflection; some produces indifference, sectarian conflict, fear, or wasted effort. A soul-making explanation needs a dose-response account: why this degree of distance, for these people, across these cultures and historical periods, is better suited to the proposed development than clearer alternatives.

Without such constraints, the reply merely renames the datum. Hiddenness occurred, so hiddenness must have been needed for growth. That inference has no independent bridge. Evidence of the alleged growth, comparative reasons against less costly designs, and boundaries beyond which distance would count as excessive would turn the reply into an explanation.

6.3 Purposive evidence cannot erase source identification

Moser argues that evidence of divine reality may be purposively available: fitted to a morally transformative invitation rather than supplied as detached information (Moser 2008). This insight correctly resists the assumption that a personal relationship is equivalent to a laboratory finding. It does not show why the identity of the inviter should remain ambiguous to sincere people. Transformation can be assessed only after the person can reasonably identify who is inviting what. A stranger's anonymous influence may improve someone; it does not yet establish a reciprocal personal relationship.

The reply also risks circularity if receptivity to the target deity is required before the person can recognize evidence of that deity. A person who remains unconvinced is then classified as unreceptive, and the classification is inferred from the nonbelief it was introduced to explain. Purposive evidence needs independent indicators of receptivity and some account of why honest cognitive access would frustrate rather than support the intended response.

6.4 Implicit relationship changes the target

Poston and Dougherty explore whether a person can stand in a meaningful relation to the deity *de re*—in relation to the thing itself—without believing the correct description of that deity (Poston and Dougherty 2007). The possibility is important. A person may respond to truth, compassion, or conscience while misunderstanding their alleged source. If the relevant theology requires only that orientation, hiddenness pressure may decrease.

The cost is doctrinal. A theory of anonymous or implicit relationship cannot simultaneously insist that explicit belief, named allegiance, or correct proclamation is urgently required. Nor does every valued response become evidence of a concealed divine relationship. Naturalistic and rival religious accounts predict many of the same attitudes. The *de re* move is a coherent theological revision, not a free preservation of every original claim.

6.5 Sin may explain some cases, not the pattern by default

Plantinga's model includes cognitive effects of sin, and recent work carefully distinguishes universal from partial sin-based explanations (Plantinga 2000; Baker-Hytch 2025). A partial account is plausible: some people resist unwelcome conclusions. The attribute-expectation test is compatible with that. A universal account incurs a far greater burden. It must explain why apparent openness, costly inquiry, and character do not track belief in the predicted way, and why alleged resistance is distributed along lines of family and geography.

If the explanation says that hidden sin causes every sincere-seeming case, the proposal becomes inaccessible to correction. Belief confirms grace or receptivity; nonbelief confirms concealed resistance. The demographic pattern then implies implausibly large regional differences in relevant vice unless additional mechanisms are added. Each new mechanism may be possible. Possibility is not comparative support.

7 One-Way Elasticity and the Mystery Trap

The central polemical point can now be stated without caricature. The target attributes are often thick when confidence is being recruited. Perfect love means more than neutral nonmalice; it promises care and relationship. Omnipotence means more than abstract modal status; it assures that rescue and communication are possible. Omniscience means the person is fully known. Revelation means that the deity has spoken. These descriptions are allowed to carry emotional, practical, and evidential weight.

When public patterns are examined, however, the terms can become thin. Love need not resemble any accessible care. Communication need not produce shared understanding. Power need not produce a recognizable intervention. Knowledge need not prevent persistent mismatch. Mystery is invoked not as a local admission of ignorance but as a general permission for the world to look exactly as it would without the asserted attribute cluster.

That is one-way elasticity: semantic richness expands to secure devotion and contracts to evade criticism. The move is unstable because the same content cannot rationally do both jobs. If divine love is too unlike recognizable love to generate even defeasible expectations, it is also too unlike recognizable love to support confidence that people are cared for. If revelation has no success conditions available to recipients, calling a text revelation cannot explain why its message should be trusted.

Mystery does have a legitimate role. On the target conception, finite people would not understand every reason of an unlimited mind. But the inference from "we might miss some reasons" to "every contrary pattern is neutralized" is invalid. Human ignorance widens uncertainty in both directions. It may conceal justifying reasons; it may also conceal further problems. Without independent evidence that unknown reasons favor the target, mystery instructs caution rather than confidence.

The rational options are straightforward. Preserve robust attributes and accept that the public data count against the target to some degree. Qualify the attributes or their human-directed scope. Supply constrained auxiliary explanations with independent support. Or treat the terms as devotional honorifics and stop presenting them as public explanations. What is not available is maximal content without evidential exposure.

8 Objections and Replies

8.1 "This anthropomorphizes the divine"

The argument does not assume that a deity is simply a larger human. It uses the content supplied by the God-concept. If *love*, *relationship*, *communication*, and *command* bear no intelligible relation to their ordinary uses, the initial theology becomes opaque. Analogy can qualify a predicate without emptying it. A claim that divine love exceeds human love should normally strengthen, not erase, the expectation of competent care.

8.2 “We cannot know the probabilities”

Exact numbers are unnecessary for every evidential comparison. We often know that a skilled communicator is more likely than an unskilled one to produce understanding without assigning a percentage. The paper makes directional claims and marks uncertainty. If a defender denies even the direction—claiming that universal relational love gives no reason at all to expect access—the price is semantic, not merely numerical.

8.3 “There is no neutral rival”

No inquiry begins from a view outside every background commitment. That does not make comparison arbitrary. Competing hypotheses earn standing through coherence, prior evidence, predictive success, and correction. Natural social transmission predicts cultural clustering because mechanisms of family, language, institutions, and power are independently observed. The target God-concept may possess countervailing evidence, but it cannot dismiss a rival merely because no comparison is presupposition-free.

8.4 “Religious experience supplies private evidence”

Alston argues that religious experience can provide *prima facie* justification within a socially established doxastic practice (Alston 1991). The attribute-expectation test need not deny every private warrant. It asks why access is distributed as it is, how conflicting experiences should be compared, and whether private confidence offsets public contrary patterns for people who lack the experience. Evidence can be person-relative without becoming transferable on demand.

8.5 “Properly basic belief needs no public argument”

Plantinga’s model is conditional: if the relevant cognitive process is functioning properly in an appropriate environment according to a successful design plan, theistic belief could have warrant (Plantinga 2000). The model shows a possibility, not that every actual belief has those features. Demographic variation, conflicting outputs, and apparent nonresistant nonbelief remain possible defeaters or design questions. Calling a belief basic does not make it immune to evidence.

8.6 “The cumulative case may outweigh hiddenness”

Correct. The test concerns one family of evidence. Cosmological, historical, experiential, moral, or other arguments may be offered on the other side. Rational assessment combines them. But combination requires preserving the sign of each contribution. A cumulative case cannot honestly count favorable data and relabel unfavorable data as no data merely because the total conclusion is preferred.

8.7 “The demand would require spectacle”

The demand is for adequate accessibility, not theatrical domination. The false dilemma between overwhelming display and pervasive ambiguity ignores tailored, noncoercive, redundant communication. A defender who claims all such intermediate methods would defeat a greater purpose owes an argument proportionate to that sweeping claim.

8.8 “Critics are setting standards they would never accept”

The test is symmetrical. Naturalistic, humanistic, and rival religious hypotheses should also make predictions and absorb contrary evidence only under constrained explanations. A critic who protects naturalism from every observation by ad hoc stories commits the same error. Symmetry does not remove the pressure on the target God-concept; it prevents identity from deciding the evidential rules.

9 A Responsible Attribute-Expectation Procedure

The paper’s constructive proposal is a six-stage audit. It is designed to make disagreement local and inspectable rather than to produce a mechanical verdict.

1. **Specify the God-concept.** Name the attributes, aims, human scope, and alleged stakes. Do not slide between a distant creator and a relationship-seeking personal deity.
2. **Derive defeasible expectations.** State what each attribute makes more or less likely before inspecting the convenient outcome. Include competing aims where there is independent reason to expect them.
3. **Name the public data.** Distinguish isolated anecdotes from durable patterns. Record sincerity limits, measurement uncertainty, and alternative descriptions.
4. **Choose live rivals.** Compare mechanisms rather than a favored theory with an empty negation. Ask which observations each rival makes less surprising.
5. **Audit auxiliary explanations.** Require independent motivation, specificity, new consequences, and proportionality. Penalize adjustments that appear only after failure and predict nothing further.
6. **Update honestly.** Lower, raise, or suspend confidence in proportion to the total evidence. If another argument offsets the pressure, say so; do not pretend the pressure vanished.

Table 4: Possible outcomes of the attribute-expectation audit.

Audit result	Meaning	Rational response	What should not be claimed
Prediction succeeds	The expected pattern appears more clearly than rivals led us to expect.	Raise confidence to the degree warranted, subject to alternative explanations.	That one success proves the whole theology
Constrained exception succeeds	A supported auxiliary explanation predicts the apparent failure and further data.	Retain or revise confidence while testing the added consequences.	That any merely possible reason would have sufficed
Prediction fails	The contrary pattern is less surprising under a live rival.	Lower confidence in the attribute, its scope, or the combined God-concept.	That failure deductively disproves every deity
No risk can be stated	Every possible observation is declared compatible with the attribute.	Reclassify the term as honorific or demand a more informative theory.	That the attribute publicly explains the observed world

This procedure allows genuine disagreement. People may dispute the sincerity evidence, the best contrast class, the likelihood direction, or the independent support for an auxiliary explanation. Those disputes are progress because they identify the load-bearing premise. “Expecting too much” does not. It condemns the expectation before showing that the theology did not generate it.

10 Conclusion

The attribute-expectation test is an internal evidential audit, not a disproof of every form of Christianity, every personal religious experience, or every possible revision of theism. It evaluates a specific conjunction: perfect love, complete knowledge, unlimited relevant power, human-directed relationship, intentional communication, and often high stakes. That conjunction does not sit silently beside the public world. It predicts.

The actual pattern contains apparent nonresistant nonbelief, heavy demographic dependence, doctrinal fragmentation, and explanations elastic enough to survive any outcome. None is a knockdown contradiction. Together they are exactly the kind of data a responsible hypothesis must face. Freedom, soul-making, purposive evidence, implicit relationship, resistance, and mystery may reduce the pressure in particular cases. Their mere availability does not cancel it. Each reply must show why the amount and distribution of hiddenness are more expected once the proposed constraint is added, and each must risk consequences beyond the datum it was designed to rescue.

The polemical verdict is therefore unavoidable. Theology does not get to advertise maximally vivid attributes and then plead semantic poverty when those attributes fail to predict the world. If perfect love, unlimited power, and complete knowledge are rich enough to justify trust, they are rich enough to generate public expectations. If they generate none, they are ceremonial titles. If they generate some, contrary evidence matters.

The skeptic is not demanding that an unlimited being perform on command. The skeptic is refusing to let devotional language collect evidential credit without evidential liability. The burden is not on the critic to expect less. It is on the defender to explain why the theology's own descriptions should lead a careful observer to expect a world so difficult to distinguish from silence, inheritance, and human interpretation.

A Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

This appendix states the paper's core reasoning in both ordinary and symbolic form. The notation is deliberately limited. It records comparative evidential relations without pretending that the available evidence fixes exact numerical probabilities.

A.1 Symbols

- T : the target God-concept—perfectly loving, completely knowledgeable, unlimited in relevant power, human-focused, relationship-seeking, and intentionally communicative.
- R : a live rival hypothesis, such as a natural social-transmission account or a deity with materially different attributes or aims.
- E : an observed public pattern, including the amount and distribution of nonbelief, demographic dependence, doctrinal disagreement, and retrospective rescue.
- A : an auxiliary explanation added to T , such as freedom, soul-making, purposive evidence, implicit relationship, or resistance.
- P : the probability or expectedness function.
- $L_{T:R}$: the likelihood-ratio function comparing T with R .
- $C(A)$: the constraint condition requiring independent motivation, specificity, further consequences, and proportionality for A .
- $M(T)$: the claim that T has public empirical or explanatory content.

A.2 Attribute content and prediction

$$M(T) \rightarrow \exists E (P(E | T) \neq P(E | R)).$$

Plain-English annotation. If the target God-concept has public explanatory content, then at least one observable pattern must be more or less expected under it than under a serious rival. The formula does not say which pattern must occur without exception. It says that a meaningful public hypothesis must make some difference to expectation.

The premise distinguishes descriptive content from honorific praise. A term may remain meaningful within worship or identity while doing no public explanatory work. The paper's criticism concerns attempts to use the same term as evidence and then deny every predictive consequence.

A.3 The favorable prediction

Let E^+ represent broad, appropriately tailored accessibility, clearer source identification, and lower dependence on accident of birth.

$$T \rightarrow P(E^+ | T) > P(E^+ | R).$$

Plain-English annotation. The target attributes jointly make accessible and intelligible contact more expected than a rival lacking those attributes does. Perfect love supplies the stated relational aim, complete knowledge removes accidental misunderstanding, and unlimited power removes ordinary limits on reaching people. The inequality states a tendency, not a guarantee about every person at every moment.

A.4 The observed pressure

Let E^- represent the joint public pattern emphasized in the paper: durable apparently sincere nonbelief, demographic clustering, core doctrinal fragmentation, and explanations revised to fit every result.

$$P(E^- | T) < P(E^- | R).$$

Plain-English annotation. This is the central evidential premise. It says that the combined contrary pattern is less surprising under at least one live rival than under the unqualified target God-concept. No exact numbers are asserted. A defender can reject the premise by showing that the target predicts the pattern at least as well, but must supply reasons rather than point only to bare possibility.

A.5 Likelihood direction

$$L_{T:R}(E^-) = \frac{P(E^- | T)}{P(E^- | R)} < 1.$$

Plain-English annotation. The likelihood ratio divides the expectedness of the evidence under the target by its expectedness under the rival. A value below one means the evidence favors the rival over the target. This does not prove the rival true or calculate final confidence; other evidence and prior confidence still matter.

A.6 The update consequence

$$L_{T:R}(E^-) < 1 \rightarrow \frac{P(T | E^-)}{P(R | E^-)} < \frac{P(T)}{P(R)}.$$

Plain-English annotation. If the contrary pattern is less expected under the target, observing it lowers the target's odds relative to the rival. The target may still remain more probable overall if it began with much stronger support or has powerful evidence elsewhere. The conclusion is an honest downward update, not automatic atheism.

A.7 Legitimate auxiliary explanations

$$C(A) \wedge P(E^- \mid T \wedge A) \geq P(E^- \mid R) \rightarrow \neg(E^- \text{ favors } R \text{ over } T \wedge A).$$

Plain-English annotation. An added explanation can remove or reverse the evidential pressure when two conditions are met. First, it must be independently motivated, specific, testable through further consequences, and proportionate. Second, the evidence must become at least as expected under the enriched target as under the rival. This is how freedom or soul-making could genuinely answer the argument.

A.8 The ad hoc rescue failure

$$\neg C(A) \wedge \forall E P(E \mid T \wedge A) > 0 \not\Rightarrow M(T \wedge A).$$

Plain-English annotation. Suppose the added explanation lacks independent constraints and is adjusted so that every possible observation is allowed. Its ability to make the evidence merely possible does not show that the enriched theory explains the evidence. A theory that survives everything may have stopped distinguishing itself from its rivals.

A.9 The one-way-elasticity dilemma

$$\left[M(T) \rightarrow \text{predictive exposure} \right] \wedge \left[\neg \text{predictive exposure} \rightarrow \neg M(T) \right].$$

Plain-English annotation. If the attributes function as public descriptions, they must be exposed to observations that can count for or against them. If defenders deny all such exposure, the attributes may still express devotion, but they no longer function as public explanations. The same language cannot rationally earn evidential credit while refusing every evidential risk.

A.10 Central deduction

$$\begin{aligned} & M(T) \rightarrow \exists E (P(E \mid T) \neq P(E \mid R)), \\ & P(E^- \mid T) < P(E^- \mid R), \\ & \forall A \left(\neg C(A) \rightarrow A \text{ does not neutralize the comparison} \right), \\ & \therefore E^- \text{ is evidential pressure against } T \text{ relative to } R, \\ & \quad \text{unless a constrained } A \text{ restores the comparison.} \end{aligned}$$

Plain-English annotation. Line one says a public explanatory claim must change some expectations. Line two states the paper's defended comparison: the joint hiddenness pattern is less surprising under a live rival. Line three blocks explanations that are invented without independent limits and merely declare every result compatible. The conclusion is conditional and revisable: the evidence counts against the target unless a serious, constrained explanation shows why it should have been expected.

A.11 Scope limit

$$E^- \text{ pressures } T \not\Rightarrow (\forall T' \neg T').$$

Plain-English annotation. Evidence against this target God-concept does not entail that every possible deity or every form of theism is false. A distant creator, finite deity, impersonal ultimate, or revised personal conception may predict differently. The paper removes an easy dismissal and assigns an evidential burden; it does not claim a universal disproof.

A.12 Worked qualitative application

Suppose an evaluator begins with the target God-concept T and a natural social-transmission rival R . Before using the public data, the evaluator records two directional expectations. Under T , sincere capable people should generally have better access to the alleged inviter, and core beliefs should be less dependent on birthplace than ordinary institutional beliefs are. Under R , religious identity should track family, language, local authority, historical expansion, and the ordinary limits of testimony. Neither hypothesis predicts perfect uniformity.

The evaluator then examines E^- : credible reports of extended sincere seeking without conviction, strong geographical clustering, and durable core disagreement among informed adherents. The question is not whether R entails every detail. It is whether this joint pattern is less surprising under R than under the unqualified T . If the answer is yes, the likelihood ratio is below one and the evidence lowers T relative to R .

Next the defender proposes A : perhaps important human goods require learning through communities and preserving epistemic distance. The evaluator should not reject A merely because it is theological. The evaluator applies $C(A)$ by asking four concrete questions: Was community-mediated knowledge independently valued before the demographic problem appeared? Does the proposal specify where dependence should be strongest and weakest? Does it predict compensating access for people badly served by their communities? Does it explain the scale and duration of the observed clustering rather than the mere possibility of some clustering?

$$\begin{aligned} L_{T:R}(E^-) &< 1, \\ C(A) &\text{ remains unestablished,} \\ \therefore P(T \mid E^-, A) &\text{ has not been shown to recover its prior standing.} \end{aligned}$$

Plain-English annotation. The first line records the initial evidential pressure. The second says the proposed explanation has not yet met the independent-constraint test. The conclusion is deliberately limited: merely naming community, freedom, or growth does not restore the target's earlier credibility. If later evidence establishes the explanation and its further predictions, the comparison can be revisited.

This worked case shows why the test is neither a demand for certainty nor a verbal victory for skepticism. It identifies what would change the verdict. Better demographic evidence could weaken the datum. A well-supported model of community-mediated access could raise the target's likelihood. Strong independent evidence for the target could outweigh the pressure without reversing its direction. Rational disagreement therefore remains possible, but it must occur at an exposed premise rather than behind the phrase "expecting too much."

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