At the center of Paul Moser’s ambitious new book is both a desire to get individuals in communion with the divine and a—well, the—prescription for how to do so. The desire is not what sets the work apart from a large segment of twentieth-century Christian theistic writers, but Moser’s development of the ethics for the inquiry necessary to have individual communion with God is unique, and worthy of exploration by philosophers of religion. The result of Moser’s ethics is, what he calls, “relationship theism,” or a point of departure from which the human seeks to willingly be convicted by God to seek out his perfect redemption by participating in “an interpersonal relationship—the God relationship” (55).

The progression towards the ethics of inquiry required for relationship theism grows out of Moser’s conception of faith and into a defense of the existence and nature of God. If faith in God is a key object of inquiry, Moser suggests in chapter 1 that we need clarity of what “God” means. When Lewis Carroll quipped about the Snatch, “They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care; They pursued it with forks and hope; They threatened its life with a railway-share; They charmed it with smiles and soap,” Moser thinks Carroll allegorically depicts the vagueness with which people refer to the divine today. “God” is a title attributable to perfection, and so requires an invocation of worship. As it turns out, the use of “perfection” for Moser is metaphysically and morally thick. If God is real (and, the book builds towards the conclusion that we ought to seek an experience of God’s reality in our own lives), then the perfection of God contains a rich set of predicates, including that: God is sui generis in moral character (9, 13), God wants inquirers to know that God is perfect (9), God is morally perfect self-sufficiently (12), God requires imitatio Dei of humans who want a koinonia relationship with God (9), God is a personal agent (118–119), God has definite purposes in supplying evidence of divine reality to humans and self-authenticates to humans (10) but is not required to self-authenticate to all humans at any particular time (13), God is worthy of worship (11), God is praiseworthy (29), and God is supremely authoritative over all things (75). As an intellectual enterprise, projects like theodicy fail to demonstrate God’s reasons for allowing evil in the world because they cannot encapsulate who God fully is. We are limited in our ability to think about divine perfection, and so are already unable to understand God’s reasons for what happens in creation. But, far from being a constraint, our limitations create space for an encounter with God to “seek interpersonal
relationships of cooperative mutuality or reciprocity, including relationships of freely-given *agape* between God and humans” (17). Humans are called to be open and vulnerable to a God-seeking relationship, which requires more than a philosophical “ethics of belief” (in the vein of William James and W. K. Clifford)—it requires an ethics of inquiry.

Chapter 2 develops the “kind of mutuality and underlying experience” that biblical faith (i.e., the type Moser thinks supports relational theism) exemplifies (45). “Mutuality” here is exactly as we would expect: humans are willing to respond “to an intervention of God in one’s awareness or experience” (71) by entrusting the self to God, and God initiates personal interaction with humans in order to correct actions, thoughts, and feelings and to redeem the lives of those who have relational faith in God. The relationship envisioned by Moser includes traditionally-conceived notions of Christian hope and *agape* love, but he is clear that the cost of the relationship for humans is high, and a necessary condition for it is struggle. “The resolve in question,” he writes, “requires human willingness to die to the authority of all powers in conflict with God and God’s power, for the sake of living for just one ultimate personal Power” (75). Each believer who aspires to relational theism sacrifices self-agency for a *koinonia* relationship. (Moser uses *koinonia* from the onset of the book, but never defines it. Although he sets aside common definitions for some terms—“faith” for example—for other terms, he invokes them and expects that the reader knows what he means. By *koinonia*, Moser simply means “communion” or fellowship.) When the believer faces her own kenotic moment of self-sacrifice, Moser explains that she has a Christ-like “Gethsemane weakness of yielding one’s own will to God’s perfect will, even in the face of death” (77). Any who aspires to relational theism must have their own Gethsemane moment, to face a trial *with* God. The trial proves God’s moral character to the person and tests human moral character during obstacles (28). The trial is “testing for the reality of what God would value most in moral agents, including in God: their freely having enduring, faithful compassion toward other people for the sake of good, *agape*-oriented relationships between those people, even when circumstances are difficult” (29). Faith that is produced from individual Gethsemanes can, over a lifetime, yield virtues that are indicative of having a relationship with God. Like Christ, each believer faces an individual trial which results in receiving compassion and redemption from God.

Of course, believers and non-believers alike go through trials without also understanding that the product of their suffering is divine compassion in their lives. That, Moser contends in chapter 3, is because they do not have the proper ethical parameters in place to inquire about God. Any test of faith, or test of whether God is real in a person’s life, “would call for the ethics for inquiry about God, owing to the importance of responsible inquiry about God, all things considered” (116). Philosophers are at a disadvantage to establish the scope and content of this particular ethics of inquiry, because they rely on an argument-based mode of inquiry, rooted
in abstraction, which “can hinder illumination and decision-making re-
garding questions about God’s existence” (118). Being in a relationship
with God is an existential state of being, rather than an epistemic one, so
inquiries that begin with the question of God’s existence are faulty from
the start. This type of ‘intellectualism’ equivocates between arguments
and evidence, and fails to provide the “distinctive kind of evidence” a
redemptive God would employ to reconcile humanity with God—espe-
cially evidence of perfect, redemptive love (120). Since God is not limited
by evidence individuals already have (117), God can use resources be-
yond argumentation to become available to humans, and to personally offer
redemption to each person (122). As an existential enterprise, the relevant
ethics for inquiry calls for an inquirer to be in a responsible position to re-
cieve salient evidence of God’s reality and goodness. Given perfect divine
goodness, we may expect such evidence to be available to humans under
certain morally relevant conditions. God’s availability to humans does not
entail that God be present at all times, to all people, in the same way, but
Moser reminds his audience that the kenotic action of Christ proves God’s
love to humans, shows what is best for all people, and prompts a recipro-
cating relationship with the divine (167). We should not be surprised that
the divine hides, ducks and dives, and ultimately presents redemptive
love to individuals in a manner which confounds philosophers.

If the ethics of inquiry requires God to show up to each individual,
yet depends upon an experientially-available point of human departure
wherein each person is open to seeing God’s reasons for suffering and
grace, what is left is for the inquirer “to settle firsthand whether he or she is
under divine inquiry, specifically regarding his or her own will relative to
a morally perfect will” (192). In chapter 4, Moser suggests that answering
a call to God’s will requires (what he calls) “evaluative wisdom” as well as
“practical wisdom.” Evaluative wisdom helps the human agent prioritize
among values, and practical wisdom is used to prioritize among actions
(195). He rejects the “wisdom of the world,” or eloquent wisdom, which
“points to human achievement in a way that would ignore or diminish the
importance of what God has done for humans, particularly in Christ, the
ture wisdom of God” (204–205). Whereas eloquent wisdom depends upon
intellectualism for its success to show what is valuable, generally mono-
theistic (but specifically Christian) evaluative wisdom helps the agent
resist speculative arguments and bear witness to the redemptive power
and wisdom of God. Where does the believer receive assurance of redemp-
tion and imputation of wisdom? From the Spirit. There is an “intersubjec-
tive pledge” that comes from the Spirit, which transcends the individual
barriers of experience, background, and even a PhD. in philosophy that
threaten our ability to know divine grace. “Divine assurance would come
courtesy of God’s Spirit (that is, God self-manifesting and self-interpreting
action),” Moser writes, “but not just as testimony. It would come by God’s
‘pouring into our hearts,’ that is, our volitional centers as agents, the same
love from God that was self-manifested in the crucified and risen Christ”
What is felt by agents who receive this love then allows for cognitive grace to take shape, “an epistemology of grace in divine salvation of humans” (211). The ethics of inquiry inspired by divine assurance results in certitude—an interpersonal affirmation from God, rather than epistemic certainty—which confirms that we have an irreducible first-person experience of the divine (230).

The critic might contend that we could never rightly suppose that there is a divine will, or to suspect that God’s will is directed towards humanity in a way that is meaning-making for humans. It is true, Moser agrees, that our own “uncooperative attitudes” and lack of “sympathetic cooperation” with God’s will can make it seem as though God’s will is hidden (when it isn’t) or opaque (when it ought not to be). Chapter 5 provides Moser’s roadmap to those among us who are chronically lost to discover the divine purpose for redemption and to solve our inability to sympathetically cooperate with God’s will. An ethics of inquiry compels us to inquire responsibly about God, and to put ourselves in a position to receive salient evidence and meaning, which could mean that we have to be open to relinquishing our own priorities (255). Responsible inquiry yields to the presenting evidence of God’s power and love in one’s life, rather than any need to have evidence. Presenting evidence demonstrates what God has done to transform a believer’s life. And this is the crux of the God-relationship: beliefs do not transform lives, but relationships do. A relationship with God provides the experiencer with power and love that cannot be explained by a mere belief that God exists. That makes the experiencer a witness to divine love, and then her own life serves as a defense of faith in God, “an opportunity to witness similarly for the sake of a defense of faith in God, that is, a defense of its veracity or its evidential groundedness regarding God’s actual involvement” (308). Theodicy as a philosophical exercise suffers for its commitment to abstract logical problems, but a “witness-based defense” can testify more strongly to the self-manifestation of God in human experience (309). Serving as witnesses to God’s power and presence in our individual lives places the question of God’s reality squarely at the feet of each person (331).

The book’s ambition is in part derived from its pursuit of attracting readership across disciplines and theological commitments. There is, indeed, content that any scholar who has considered theodicy, the nature of God, and the response to evil will find insightful and a platform for further dialogue. Towards that end, I offer a few small points to consider, with the caveat that the book raises many more. (Two parenthetical notes may interest readers, both of which surely are intentional, and are raised without comment. Moser does not invoke a pronoun for God in the book, even when quoting scripture. The second is, as I point out in the first sentence of this review, Moser does not frame his view as an ethics for the inquiry of a relationship with the divine, but the ethics for inquiry.)

As for critical issues, the first is directed at the highly-individualistic ethics that is posited in the text. Moser, without equivocation, develops
an ethics that only requires the experiencer and God. He is clear about the individual nature of the ethics—he grounds it in Kierkegaard’s claim that the individual is the main point of the God relationship (8) and carries the tune throughout the book. There are several striking consequences of this view. Moser would have it that individuals come to faith in God, which requires the ethics of inquiry coupled with the right vulnerability and openness to the divine, but such individualism is discordant with the seeming brokenness of humanity. If those who have a need of faith are already immoral, without moral character, and broken, how are they, individually, to follow the ethics of inquiry to discover the divine? It seems much more likely that a collective group of individuals (a church?) would demonstrate the love and power of God by meeting the needs of the community around it and thereby bring others into faith. Also, Moser’s commitment to individualism favors a very small segment of Christian theology after the twentieth century, and (despite Moser’s contentions otherwise) is wildly inconsistent with, for example, Judaism and other Christian traditions, in which corporate inquiry into the holy texts is much more valuable than an individual pursuit.

Ethicists will correctly identify logical problems with Moser’s argument about why moral predicates should pertain to God, “If God is praiseworthy, as many people hold, then God would make praiseworthy choices about divine conduct . . . and would deserve credit for choosing to be perfectly good, and this credit would acknowledge God’s free choice in favor of what is good in action” (29). Finally, Moser’s ethics of inquiry has an inescapable demandingness problem. The poor unbeliever! It isn’t enough to use “reason”—reason separates a person from the experiential love and power of God—to come to the divine, it isn’t enough to poke, and prod, and raise questions. Instead, they have to have a right belief (that God exists), from the right source (God choosing to show God to the individual), in the right relationship (reciprocally with God, because of the person of Jesus Christ, through the Spirit), through the right manner (morally, through the ethics of inquiry). That the inquirer needs to be in a responsible position to receive salient evidence of God’s goodness seems to have the odd result that relational theism demands a right relationship of the person most disadvantaged to pursue it—the seeking atheist.