

# IS TRADITIONAL NATURAL THEOLOGY COGNITIVELY PRESUMPTUOUS?

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Is there any definite evidence that God exists? Various theories have emerged in response to this question. Paul K. Moser's response, known as 'volitional theism', reorients religious epistemology away from traditional natural theology toward a focus on something called 'personifying evidence of God' that emerges from divine self-manifestation in human experience. It contends that a God worthy of worship would typically provide only evidence intended to be morally transformative of a person toward God's moral character. According to this response, God would not give humans evidence for God's reality on the basis of the alleged evidence of traditional natural theology, and we should not expect otherwise, given God's redemptive moral character.

Given a suitable concept of God as redemptive toward humans, we can see that traditional natural theology is cognitively presumptuous toward God in a manner one might call 'arrogant' or 'prideful'. Suppose one considers, with no undefeated basis for rejection, that as worthy of worship and hence morally perfect, God would morally challenge humans whenever needed, including when they receive genuine evidence of God's reality, as they are tempted to become prideful about it. Suppose also that, without due evidential support, one expects God to supply evidence of divine reality via the alleged evidence from traditional natural theology (say, from traditional ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments) that does not morally challenge one in receiving such evidence. In that case, one would be cognitively presumptuous in expecting, without due support, God as morally perfect to supply the relevant evidence via traditional natural theology.

Why should one suppose, if one should, that the evidence from traditional natural theology is indicative of, or even comes from, a morally perfect God worthy of worship rather than some lesser, morally inferior “god”? Arguably, one should not suppose this at all, as this would be cognitively presumptuous relative to a morally perfect God set on the redemption of humans. Regardless of whether the morally loaded term ‘pride’ is appropriate, the key consideration, according to volitional theism, is that traditional natural theology is cognitively presumptuous relative to a God worthy of worship, owing to a dubious, ungrounded assumption about evidence of God’s reality. We shall clarify this often-neglected consideration.

Trent Dougherty and Brandon Rickabaugh (henceforth DR) have criticized the view (put in their own language, not Moser’s) “that the robust practice of natural theology reeks of epistemic pride.”<sup>1</sup> They offer three main charges against Moser’s position. First, Moser’s criticism of traditional natural theology unduly focuses on a truncated characterization of natural theology. Once we broaden natural theology to include the pursuit of knowledge of God from divine self-revelation in the natural world and human nature, so the claim goes, it becomes clear that traditional natural theology is not arrogant, but rather a humble response to such revelation. Second, the distinction between *personifying* evidence and *spectator* evidence, which figures in Moser’s argument against traditional natural theology, faces crucial problems, such as that there is no such thing as spectator evidence. Third, Moser’s view of divine revelation devalues the role of prevenient grace. We shall make some needed corrections to how DR have mischaracterized Moser’s view, and show their main charges to be faulty.

## 2. CLARIFYING ‘TRADITIONAL NATURAL THEOLOGY’

DR’s first charge against Moser is that his conception of natural theology is too narrow and should be broadened to a Thomistic characterization. We begin, therefore, with what we mean by ‘traditional natural theology’. Inquirers into the

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<sup>1</sup> T. Dougherty and B. Rickabaugh, “Natural Theology, Evidence, and Epistemic Humility,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9 (2017), 1. The previous description, in the current paper, of the ‘cognitive presumptuousness’ of traditional natural theology more accurately captures Moser’s view than does DR’s talk of “reeks of epistemic pride.” We recommend against the kind of polemical rhetorical flourish favored by DR. This kind of excess gives a bad name to much of so-called ‘Christian apologetics’, particularly in the USA, and we prefer not to stoop to it.

existence and nature of God are, we assume, seeking at least evidence that justifies various beliefs about God. We divide evidence into two kinds: *privately available* evidence and *publicly available* evidence.<sup>2</sup> Publicly available evidence is evidence that any capable inquirer has access to, at least with due effort and reflection. By 'capable', we mean that one's cognitive resources, including one's perceptual apparatus and reasoning faculties, are in good working condition; so, one can acquire information from the outside world and make good inferences based on one's cognitive resources. Examples abound of publicly available evidence. Consider the claim that Barack Obama was the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. There is abundant publicly available evidence for this claim. Any capable inquirer, having the needed cognitive resources, could collect footage of: Obama being sworn into office, Obama giving state-of-the-union addresses, thousands of people working alongside Obama and calling him 'Mr. President', and so on.

Privately available experiential evidence is itself available only to the individuals actually presented with that evidence in their experience. Differing from *reports about it*, such evidence is not automatically shareable by another capable inquirer, even via the rigorous exercise of that inquirer's cognitive resources. Consider the claim that God is now self-manifesting to me, via my being convicted in conscience of my selfishness. Let's suppose that this claim is true, and is justified by my overall experience in the absence of undefeated defeaters, such as a defeater from having an obvious experience of being under the influence of mind-altering drugs. So, I have undefeated evidence for the claim that God is now self-manifesting to me, via my being convicted in conscience of my selfishness. This particular evidence via *my* conscience is only available to me; only I have access to *this* experiential evidence of being convicted by God of my selfishness.

I could tell you about my being convicted in conscience by God (as I am doing), and even describe the qualitative texture of the experience in question: its intensity, duration, and so on. That, however, would be public testimonial evidence *about* my being convicted in conscience and my relevant evidence; it would not be my private experiential evidence of my being convicted in my conscience by God. My private evidence of being thus convicted by God is not something I can

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<sup>2</sup> This, of course, is not meant to characterize evidence exhaustively; various other distinctions apply to evidence. For a detailed sample, see Paul K. Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and Moser, *Philosophy after Objectivity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

give you. I am not in a position to supply such evidence, to you or anyone else, in the way God does in divine self-manifestation. In addition, you will not have such evidence if *God* does not give you a similar experience of divine self-manifestation in your conscience. In particular, you cannot produce such evidence just by the exercise, however rigorous, of your cognitive resources. In this regard, my evidence of God's intervention is not automatically shareable by other capable inquirers, even via rigorous exercise of their cognitive resources. It thus is privately available evidence for me, and not publicly available.<sup>3</sup>

Given a distinction between privately available evidence and publicly available evidence, we can offer an illuminating characterization and assessment of traditional natural theology. Such natural theology is the search for publicly available evidence concerning the existence and nature of God. It attempts to discover evidence that any capable inquirer looking in the right places could find, if with due effort and reflection. Its purview does not cover potential evidence that is privately available, such as evidence from various ways that God specially self-reveals God's presence or existence to individuals. This characterization of traditional natural theology fits with how most advocates of "natural theology" use the term.

The traditional natural theological arguments, such as ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments, depend on premises whose alleged supporting evidence is publicly available to all capable inquirers. For example, a proponent of a cosmological argument may ask us (a) to consult current theoretical physics to establish that the universe had a temporal beginning in the finite past and (b) to conclude, eventually, that a God-like being must have been (or at least was) the primary cause in the origin of the universe.<sup>4</sup> Such evidence from theoretical physics is publicly available to all capable inquirers. Many people, of course, would not (fully) understand the complexity of the relevant physics, but such people are not altogether unable to understand it. Given enough dedication and training, they could understand the physics and become equipped with the alleged evidence for

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<sup>3</sup> For details on the cognitive role of conscience regarding God, see Paul K. Moser, "Divine Hiddenness, Agapē Conviction, and Spiritual Discernment," forthcoming in *Discernment for Things Divine: Towards a Constructive Account of Spiritual Perception*, eds. Paul Gavriluk and Frederick Aquino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), and Paul K. Moser, *The God Relationship: The Ethics for Inquiry about the Divine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), chapter 5.

<sup>4</sup> Such an argument, like the Kalam cosmological argument, may also ask us to endorse the alleged synthetic *a priori* claim that everything that begins to exist has a cause.

the conclusion that God exists. In addition, ontological arguments are paradigm cases of natural theology. The premises in this family of arguments depend on reason alone to conclude that God exists. Evidence for these premises is allegedly available to anyone who is able to reason properly; it thus is publicly available evidence for all capable inquirers.

Publicly available evidence has different cognitive features from privately available evidence. Consider, for instance, publicly available evidence that is just *de dicto* (or, just propositional rather than *de re*). This is just one species of publicly available evidence, but it is familiar. It can be transmitted without epistemic loss through suitable testimony. Consider such publicly available evidence as the evidence that the earth's core is composed of an iron-nickel alloy. Some of us who accept this evidence have not done the experiments necessary to confirm this evidence. We are justified, however, in believing this about the earth's core, owing to the testimonial evidence from geologists whose findings are documented in peer-reviewed journals. Publicly available evidence that is just *de dicto* has this feature of transmission that privately available evidence does not.

DR apparently reject the proposed approach to natural theology, and opt for a broader, Thomistic conception of natural theology. They claim that natural theology "tracks general revelation," and they propose to expand the scope of general revelation. General revelation, they claim, is any "information conveyed about God through the natural world and human nature."<sup>5</sup> This may seem initially plausible, but it emerges as implausible when DR expand it to include "observing God's activity in . . . our own life [and] . . . evidence available in the practice of spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and prolonged self-examination."<sup>6</sup> Once evidence from the latter disciplines is included in *general* revelation, the conceptual space for *special* revelation becomes so small that the familiar distinction between general and special revelation is no longer recognizable. If prayer and such spiritual disciplines as meditation, fasting, worship, and silence count as (bases for evidence from) general revelation, the category of special revelation becomes unrecognizably, if not vanishingly, small. So, the proposed expansion seems *ad hoc*.

The spiritual disciplines in question are precisely the places where most theorists of divine revelation would say that *special* revelation would occur, if it occurs

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<sup>5</sup> Dougherty and Rickabaugh, "Natural Theology," 5.

<sup>6</sup> Dougherty and Rickabaugh, "Natural Theology," 7.

at all. For instance, one might think that God would specially self-reveal God's presence to a person through human conscience or through prayer. We say "specially" self-reveal, because it is given with particularity rather than broad generality among people. The relevant experience is evidence only for the particular person who actually receives it in his or her experience, and it is not publicly shareable by every capable inquirer with suitable cognitive resources. Such revelation lacks the generality of general revelation, because it is not distributed generally by God to all people with suitable cognitive resources. We see here a connection between some kinds of special revelation and privately available evidence. The familiar arguments of traditional natural theology, in contrast, propose publicly available evidence that differs from the evidence of such special revelation.

DR claim that, "all theological knowledge is grounded in God's gracious self-disclosure," and suggest that this point is lost on Moser. They overlook, however, that their talk of "grounded" is ambiguous between the idea of *direct* grounding and the notion of *indirect*, perhaps even highly indirect, grounding. It is compatible with Moser's foundationalist view that all knowledge of God is *ultimately* grounded in special revelation and privately available evidence directly from divine self-manifestation.<sup>7</sup> Traditional natural theology, however, does not offer such evidence directly from divine self-manifestation. So, the point in question is not lost here at all, although it is harmless against volitional theism.

### 3. PERSONIFYING EVIDENCE AND SPECTATOR EVIDENCE

Along with the distinction between privately available evidence and publicly available evidence, we should consider a distinction between personifying evidence and spectator evidence. According to Moser's *The Evidence for God*,<sup>8</sup> spectator evidence "makes no demand or call on the direction of a human will or life," in particular, toward "an authoritative call to humans from an authoritative God," whereas personifying evidence does. The talk of "direction of a human will or life" here is clearly intentional or goal-directed, and not merely causal. So, it will not be satisfied by the mere acceptance of an assertion. Instead, it involves the idea of

<sup>7</sup> For details, see Moser, *The God Relationship*, chapter 3.

<sup>8</sup> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 37. See also Moser, *The Elusive God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 46–47.

responding to an authoritative divine call on one's life-aim. (This is explicit in *The Evidence for God* and in *The Elusive God*; see the pages referenced in note 8.)

Personifying evidence will shape and direct the volitional center, and thus the life, of a person relative to God; spectator evidence will not. Finding out from a geology textbook, for instance, that the earth's core is made of an iron-nickel alloy is thus not volitionally transformative in the relevant sense. Such evidence does nothing to direct one's volitional center toward divine goodness. Lacking that kind of transformative role, such evidence qualifies as spectator evidence. One can appropriate it without transformation of one's volitional center relative to one's life-direction. Not all evidence is like this; some is volitionally transformative relative to a divine call on one's life-direction. An authoritative call by God in one's conscience, for instance, to love one's enemy unselfishly offers evidence that is relevantly transformative when received cooperatively. At least two options arise from such evidence in my conscience: I can cooperate with the call to self-sacrificial *agapē*, thereby directing my will and life favorably toward divine goodness; or I can reject or at least ignore the call, thereby hardening my heart against divine goodness.

DR claim that there is no such thing as spectator evidence because "all evidence ultimately consists in experiences with assertoric force, experiences that assert the world is a certain way, which therefore puts normative pressure on us to accept their claims."<sup>9</sup> If all evidence were of the latter sort, this would pose no problem for volitional theism and its approach to spectator evidence. It is misleading, however, to claim that the experiences in evidence "assert" something, even if they *represent* something or other. Indeed, this is a kind of category mistake, given that experiences by themselves do not make affirmations or predications at all. In addition, even if all experience in evidence has a representative feature, only some evidence has a normative feature bearing on one's life-direction relative to divine goodness. All genuine evidence *may* prompt one to adopt some conceptual or propositional content, but not all evidence prompts one to have one's volitional center transformed toward divine goodness. DR's claim about experience in evidence is thus no threat; it is compatible with the distinction of volitional theism between personifying and spectator evidence.

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<sup>9</sup> Dougherty and Rickabaugh, "Natural Theology," 11.

DR cite Moser's following description of personifying evidence: "...*this evidence becomes salient to inquirers as they, themselves, responsively and willingly become evidence of God's reality, in willingly receiving and reflecting God's powerful moral character—specifically divine, unselfish love for others, even one's enemies.*"<sup>10</sup> They claim that this is not a clear notion of evidence, and they wonder if the evidence mentioned is personifying or propositional evidence. DR state: "If [it's] the former, then it's deeply flawed, because then it appeals to the very notion it purports to explicate. If Moser means the latter, then propositional evidence is appropriate proximate evidence for God, since it is the operative evidence according to what he says."<sup>11</sup>

Two considerations undermine the criticism. First, the talk of evidence in the quotation is just talk of a truth-indicator (the latter involving Moser's core notion for understanding the idea of evidence).<sup>12</sup> So, the relevant notion of evidence need not, and does not, include the key idea of *personifying* evidence; the latter idea goes beyond the basic notion of evidence as a truth-indicator. As a result, there is no conceptual circularity here.

Second, DR mistakenly pit personifying evidence against propositional evidence. This is a category mistake. Personifying evidence can be either propositional or non-propositional evidence. It could be the direct experience of comfort, mercy, grace, and love in human conscience from a morally perfect God, and that would typically be non-propositional evidence. Alternatively, personifying evidence could include a thought, in propositional form, communicated to a human by God through conscience, and that would be propositional evidence. The operative evidence in a particular case will depend on the details of that case, such as whether a special revelation in the case is propositional rather than non-propositional in nature.<sup>13</sup> That, of course, would be up to God, and the relevant evidence will not automatically be shareable by other inquirers.

DR's third main claim is that Moser's view "devalues the role of prevenient grace."<sup>14</sup> Prevenient grace, as DR understand it, "comes before effectual grace, and is based neither on knowledge of special revelation nor any explicit knowledge of

<sup>10</sup> Moser, *The Evidence for God*, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Dougherty and Rickabaugh, "Natural Theology," 13.

<sup>12</sup> For details, see Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> For elaboration, see Moser, *The God Relationship*, chapter 5.

<sup>14</sup> Dougherty and Rickabaugh, "Natural Theology," 16.



God at all.<sup>15</sup> It is doubtful, however, that volitional theism devalues prevenient grace in any way. For instance, as *The Evidence for God* makes clear,<sup>16</sup> a recipient of personifying evidence need not recognize that God is the one offering the personifying evidence. One may not be aware of the source of the personifying evidence but still find oneself having, and even cooperating with, such evidence. One of the explanatory strengths of volitional theism is that people with personifying evidence for God need not be aware that God is the source of their transformative evidence. Many such people could call God by different names or even be agnostic about God's existence. This is an explanatory virtue of volitional theism, especially given the reality of religious diversity. Prevenient grace fits well with volitional theism.

A God worthy of worship, being morally perfect, would be profoundly redemptive in a manner that makes changing people's volitional centers more important than achieving their intellectual assent to God's existence. Beliefs do matter in some ways, of course, and they can add depth to a divine-human relationship, but they are not as important, redemptively, as the moral transformation of people into the likeness of God's morally perfect character. Indeed, this consideration figures in an explanation of why a God worthy of worship would not be interested in the spectator evidence sought by traditional natural theology. The latter evidence would yield, by itself, at most an opportunity for intellectual assent to God's existence.<sup>17</sup> A God worthy of worship, however, would not be primarily concerned with people acquiring knowledge of the proposition that God exists. Human transformation toward God's moral character, for the sake of divine-human fellowship, would come first.

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<sup>15</sup> Dougherty and Rickabaugh, "Natural Theology," 13.

<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 5, particularly in connection with the example of the young girl on an isolated island.

<sup>17</sup> For specific doubts that the arguments of traditional natural theology yield the reality of a personal God worthy of worship, see Moser, *The Evidence for God*, chapter 3. See also Moser, *The God Relationship*, pp. 223–27, 324–28. Significantly, for all of their rhetoric favoring natural theology, DR do not offer an argument that yields the reality of such a God. This is a striking omission. We doubt that they have a good argument to offer.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

We now can return, in conclusion, to the cognitive presumptuousness in traditional natural theology. A God worthy of worship would rightly prioritize and value human volitional transformation toward God's moral character over propositional knowledge that God exists. This kind of God would not seek to have people come to know that God exists via spectator evidence; so, we should not expect such a God to supply such evidence for divine reality. Having spectator evidence of God's existence without the accompanying divine redemptive call would be damaging to an inquirer, if only by having the inquirer think of God without a divine challenge to conform to divine goodness in contrast to human pride. A god who separates this intended redemptive component from evidence for divine reality is not the morally perfect God worthy of worship, but is at best a lesser, morally inferior god. Traditional natural theology leaves us at most with such a lesser god, relative to the worship-worthy God who seeks human redemption, and not just human belief, via evidence from divine self-manifestation.

Traditional natural theology is cognitively presumptuous in assuming, without due support, that the evidence for divine reality is accessible to all capable inquirers with adequate cognitive resources, as if the evidence were offered indiscriminately for all such inquirers. This assumption unduly neglects the volitional consideration of a human life-direction that would be crucially important to a redemptive God of moral perfection. Such a God would attend to what a human *wills* in relation to God and divine goodness, and the evidence for divine reality, correspondingly, would be sensitive to this volitional consideration. John's Gospel moves in this direction in its attributing to Jesus the remark that if anyone *wills* to do the will of God, that person will know whether certain claims are from God (John 7:17). The direction of one's willing (and living) would be crucial to a redemptive God of moral perfection, and our epistemology of evidence for God should accommodate this lesson. The volitional theism defended here aims to do so, with help from its distinction between spectator and personifying evidence for God's existence. An important result is that traditional natural theology emerges as cognitively presumptuous. In that regard, it is cognitively defective.