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Ramified Natural Theology, the Moser Way?

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Abstract: Moser's vision for philosophy has both a positive and a negative component. The positive component is a reorientation of philosophical practice around wisdom and moral transformation; the negative component is a criticism of much philosophy, including natural theology, as being at odds with this. Moser has leveled a challenge to produce a plausible piece of natural theology that is not deficient in this respect. Here I attempt to do exactly that. I defend a version of the moral argument that does not presuppose moral realism of any sort.

1. Moser's Project

Moser's recent work, developed over a trilogy of books *The Elusive God, The Evidence for God* and *The Severity of God*,[1] articulates not just a religious epistemology, but a distinctive vision of philosophy as a whole; its purpose and value, and what constitutes good and worthwhile philosophical practice. This vision is at odds with a good deal of philosophy as it is currently practiced, which is primarily discursive; centering around providing arguments or giving reasons to hold certain claims as true. Moser on the other hand wants to reinstate an older, loftier conception of philosophy, in which the goal of philosophy is wisdom, and what philosophers seek is nothing less than moral and spiritual transformation—as opposed to, say, the underlying logical form of definite descriptions. For some purposes, arguments fall short. As Chesterton once said, 'if you or I were dealing with a mind that was growing morbid, we should be chiefly concerned not so much to give it arguments as to give it air, to convince it that there was something cleaner and cooler outside the suffocation of a single argument.'[2] And as with the morbid mind, to too with wisdom and moral transformation. Arguments, conceptual analyses and the rest of the gamut of tools at the disposal of today's philosopher do not bring about the moral transformation and wisdom which is the proper goal of philosophy:

[1] Cambridge University Press (2008, 2010, 2013).
[2] *Orthodoxy* (1908), p. 12.

> Philosophers may seek concepts, analyses, principles, and arguments, but God sends a personal, intentional agent in Christ to secure human redemption. Even when concepts analyses, principles, and arguments are a helpful means to an end, they are not the end itself in a Christian philosophy.[3]

This instead requires a 'mysterious *inward union*'[4] with God which, unlike ordinary philosophy, engages our volition and deepest motives. This is the positive aspect of Moser's project.[5]

The negative aspect follows quickly. Philosophy not conducive to human redemption, wisdom and moral transformation is defective, since it fails to en-gage with philosophy's proper goal. Nor is this limited to secular philosophy. Religious philosophies are equally apt to fail in this regard, and 'traditional natural theology' is the target of much of Moser's criticism. Even if the arguments of traditional natural theology succeed in showing that something godlike exists (and Moser has his doubts), they will still fall short of evidence for a *morally perfect*, personal God, worthy of worship. The sort of evidence brought to bear on natural theology is what Moser calls *spectator evidence*: evidence that 'makes no demand on the human will to cooperate with God's will and involves only *de dicto*, and no de re, content regarding God.'[6] Now, not everyone will endorse the thought that mere spectator evidence cannot be used to argue for a moral God. Leibniz, in the *Monadology* and *Theodicy*, took his cosmological argument to establish not just the existence of God, but God's moral perfection, so contemporary Leibnizians may resist Moser's claim here.[7] But since my interests here are not to do with traditional natural theology I will not attempt to adjudicate on these particular claims.

Not only are traditional natural theological arguments insufficient to establish the existence of God *qua* morally perfect and redemptive being, they are actually an unnecessary and harmful distraction. Traditional natural theology is blind to what a morally perfect God's purposes would be; namely bringing persons into communion with Godself and morally redeeming them.

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[3] *Severity*, pp. 170-1.

[4] Ibid., p.172

[5] In many respects Moser's recent writings have a distinctly Eastern Orthodox feel. Compare Vladimir Lossky: 'Christian theology is always in the last resort a means: a unity of knowledge subserving an end which transcends all knowledge. This ultimate end is union with God'. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (James Clarke & Co., Ltd, 1957), p.9.

[6] *Severity*, 124.

[7] Although what Leibniz understood by moral perfection may be somewhat idiosyncratic by most people's standards.

If God exists, God is capable of revealing Godself to persons without their having engaged in natural theology. God's disclosure of Godself to human persons would, moreover, be in keeping with God's purposes:

> [We should] not acknowledge God *just* in the conclusion of a merely propositional argument; otherwise, we would omit a crucial *de re* factor regarding God's intervening moral character. Similarly, we should not presume to be able to *think* or *reason* our way into God's presence or approval. Instead, aiming for redemption, God ... would call for our volitional resolve to accommodate God's will inwardly over time and now, diachronically as well as synchronically."[8]

> [Arguments of traditional natural theology] fail to accommodate the motive(s) that God, as worthy of worship would want in human inquiry and belief regarding God. This God, according to this section, does not need the arguments of natural theology and is not the god represented by such arguments.[9]

The traditional project of natural theology, according to Moser, is broadly incompatible with the proper goals of philosophy and should be done away with.[10]

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[8] *Severity*, p.95.

[9] Ibid., p121.

[10] Moser upbraids Woldeyohannes for claiming (in "Given the Evidence, Natural Theologyis Here to Stay!", available at http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Woldeyohannes%20(Given%20the%20Evidence%20Natural%20Theology%20is%20Here%20to%20Stay).pdf) that he wants to do away with natural theology when, to the contrary, he has himself 'proposed a distinctive first-person perspective argument of natural theology' in *The Elusive God* and *The Evidence for God* ("How Not to Defend Natural Theology: Reply to Woldeyohannes", available at http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Moser%20(How%20Not%20to%20Defend%20Natural%20Theology-revised).pdf). But this isn't right. Elsewhere Moser is explicit that his is not an argument of natural theology, as he defines the term, since the source of evidence involved is not natural: "We can give sound arguments for God's reality, but they cannot be reduced to natural theology limited to natural sources of evidence. They need to allow for supernatural evidence that comes from the power of a God of self-giving love' ('Religious Epistemology Personified: God without Natural Theology', in *The Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity* (Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012)). That natural theology should be done away with is strongly suggested by this combined with claims that natural theology is 'inadequate and dispensable' and 'at best, beside the point regarding the Jewish-Christian God' (ibid.).

2. Ramified Natural Theology

Another approach, suggested by a number of interlocutors in this project, is to claim that there is nothing inherently defective about arguing for the existence of God, but that philosophers would do well to advance arguments, not for a generic First Cause, but for the Christian God: a morally perfect God worthy of worship. Angus Menuge in particular has commended ramified, *personalised* natural theology, which aims not just for soundness, but for arguments that 'engage individuals at a deep personal level'.[11] In response, Moser has charged advocates of ramified natural theology to produce such an argument.[12] The less foolhardy participants in the project have demurred from this challenge, but here I want to recommend one such argument. The argument is broadly Kantian. In a section of the First Critique entitled *The Canon of Pure Reason* (A 796-819/B 824-847) Kant argued that practical reason makes it rationally necessary to postulate the existence of God. Kant took it that, in some important senses, morality has nothing to do with happiness: the end of happiness is not what motivates moral action and is not what makes action morally right; nor is there an *a priori* link between moral action and happiness. Whilst happiness must be willed by human beings, the nature of moral action and the nature of happiness offer no guarantee on their own that the two things will converge. And so we have a practical antinomy: we are rationally obliged to will both what is morally right and our own happiness, but the effects of morally right deeds may not result in our being happy. God is required to ensure that moral behaviour and happiness converge, so to rationally engage in moral action, God must be postulated:

> [S]ince the obligation from the moral law remains valid for each particular use of freedom even if others do not conduct themselves in accord with the law, how their consequences will be related to happiness is determined neither by the nature of the things in the world, nor by the causality of actions themselves and their relation to morality; and the necessary connection of the hope of being happy with the unremitting effort to make oneself worthy of happiness that has been adduced cannot be cognised through reason if it is grounded merely in nature, but

[11] See Angus Menuge, "Ramified Personalized Natural Theology: A Third Way?" Available at http: http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Menuge (Ramified Personalized Natural Theology).pdf

[12] See Paul K. Moser, "Rejoinder to Angus Menuge on Ramified Personalized Natural Theology." Available at: http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Moser%20(Ramified%20Natural%20Theology-ReplyToMenuge).pdf

> may be hoped for only if it is at the same time grounded on a *highest reason*, which commands in accordance with the moral laws, as at the same time the cause of nature.[13]

I say my argument is broadly Kantian, but it is not Kant's own; and since my goal is not historical exegesis I will simply avoid the many fraught issues regarding the interpretation of Kant's moral argument, how it interacts with his transcendental idealism and whether Kant could properly be called a theist. The argument also makes use of a more parsimonious set of premises to do with undertaking moral commitments—that happiness must rationally be willed is not one of the its claims. Like Kant's own moral argument it is an *absurdum practicum*; claiming that a particular *practice*—in this case, the practice of undertaking moral commitments—is irrational without undertaking particular ontological commitments. It is a generalisation of the thought that it is irrational to undertake to achieve some goal or set of goals which one knows is impossible.

Individual goals are irrational when the agent who undertakes them knows they are impossible to meet. It's irrational for instance to undertake the goal FLY BY FLAPPING MY ARMS. But compossibility also comes into play here. Setting oneself the goal MAKE BREAKFAST is fine, as is DON'T MAKE BREAKFAST, BUT THE SET OF GOALS {MAKE BREAKFAST, DON'T MAKE BREAKFAST} clearly is not, since the goals are not compossible. This doesn't just happen when there is a logical contradiction involved; a set of goals can be mutually, practically impossible. The goal set Σ ={WRITE PAPER B TODAY, INDEX BOOK C TODAY, GRADE EXAMS D TODAY} let us say is practically impossible because too arduous. A being with greater powers might be able to rationally undertake Σ, so long as those powers were sufficient to discharge the goals in Σ. Someone with an overly optimistic view of his own abilities might mistakenly think that he could discharge Σ—here a different sort of irrationality is in play—but if one knows it is practically impossible complete Σ then it would be irrational to commit oneself to discharging Σ, and for the same reason that it is irrational to undertake the commitment sets {FLY BY FLAPPING MY ARMS} or {MAKE BREAKFAST, DON'T MAKE BREAKFAST}. What about the set Σ_M of one's moral commitments? Is it rational to undertake this commitment set? That depends on whether it is practically possible to discharge Σ_M, and therein lies a problem. If a person discharges all of her moral commitments, she is perfectly virtuous (at least by her own lights). So the

[13] A 810/B 838

practical possibility of discharging Σ_M is equivalent to the practical possibility of being perfectly virtuous. However, for most of us at least, it doesn't require a great deal of self-reflection to realise that we are not capable of being perfectly virtuous by our own strength. So, to rationally undertake Σ_M, we would have to believe in an external source of morally redemptive power. One can't rationally go in for moral practice, which involves undertaking moral commitments, unless one believes in an external source of redemptive power or sanctification. Summarising, the argument runs as follows: (1) It is irrational to undertake a commitment or set of commitments to act in various ways if (one knows that) it is impossible to discharge these commitments. (2) Undertaking moral commitments involves undertaking commitments to act in various ways. (3) If an agent always discharges his moral commitments, he is perfectly virtuous (by his own lights). (4) It is impossible to be perfectly virtuous (even by one's own lights) by one's own power. (5) Hence, it is irrational for an agent to undertake moral commitments unless that agent supposes that there is something that acts as an external source of redemptive power or sanctification.

(1-5) is not strictly logically valid but can easily, if slightly laboriously, be made so. If sound it forces a choice between believing in a source of redemptive power or sanctification and accepting that undertaking moral commitments is irrational. If we accept that undertaking moral commitments is rational, then we are committed to the existence of an external source of redemptive power or sanctification. So there is a valid argument from, I will contend, plausible premises for commitment to the existence of a source of redemptive power. It may even be sound. By Moser's own lights, this is an argument not just for commitment to an external source of redemptive power, but for commitment to the existence of God—*qua* morally perfect and redemptive being—since:

> The genuine offer and the human reception of the transformative gift ... require a divine source that has the power of thorough- going forgiveness and transformation of willing humans to a new volitional center of *default unselfish love and forgiveness toward all people*. Indeed, it is part of the concept of the transformative gift, as characterized, that the source of this gift (when this gift is real) is a powerful divine authority of thoroughgoing forgiveness who is worthy of worship.[14]

I am unsure whether this is a rejoinder to or an endorsement of Moser's vision for philosophy. On the one hand it seems to go against the grain of it's negative

[14] *The Evidence for God*, p.204. See also *Severity*, p.187.

aspect—it is after all a piece of ramified natural theology[15]—on the other hand it seems to me to be in line with its positive aspect—a point I will elaborate later. If it is some kind of rejoinder it is not, I hope, a glib one. Moser has produced a rich and important body of work that demands attention from reflective people. This includes its negative aspect, much of which is rightly chastening. A queasiness about some parts of the apologetics industry, for instance, is something eminently recognisable; as is the temptation to use philosophy as a distraction from the difficult and often unpalatable work of real self-examination and moral transformation. With this said, something should be done to unpack the argument's premises and defend their plausibility.

3. Undertaking Moral Commitments

By *undertaking a moral commitment* I mean *accepting a moral claim*. The sense of *accepting* used here is deliberately neutral between cognitivist and noncognitivist understandings of what it is to accept a moral claim. That is to say, it is neutral on issues such as whether moral language is representational, whether it is non-representational yet capable of having a truth value (or not capable of having a truth value), whether moral claims express beliefs or other kinds of attitudes, and so on. Undertaking a commitment to the claim "Selfishness is wrong" has been understood variously as representing a thing (selfishness) as instantiating a property (wrongness), as expressing a commitment not to treat people selfishly, as expressing an attitude of disapproval to selfishness, and in a number of other ways besides. The sense of *moral commitment* here is a placeholder; it takes no stance on what is the correct account of moral thought and language.

I say that accepting moral claims involves undertaking commitments to act in various ways, but something more should be said about what is meant by a commitment in this context. A person who believes P and P→Q is thereby committed to Q, whether or not he actually believes (explicitly or implicitly) Q. A person who accepts the claim that everything Moser says is true, is committed to *Glasgow is more Scottish than Edinburgh* if Moser has said that Glasgow is more Scottish than Edinburgh, whether or not he actually believes (explicitly or implicitly) that Glasgow is more Scottish than Edinburgh. A person who accepts the claim that grass is green is thereby committed to grass being coloured. So accepting a claim involves undertaking commitments to

[15] This point should not be overstated though, since Moser himself provides an argument for the existence of God in *The Elusive God* and *The Evidence for God*; albeit one that is unusual insofar as it appeals explicitly to volitionally sensitive, rather than 'spectator' evidence, and, for the reasons given earlier, is not a piece of *natural* theology.

other claims. Accepting moral claims involves undertaking commitments to action. Accepting the claim that cruelty is wrong for example involves undertaking a commitment not to treat people cruelly.[16]

This follows immediately from some accounts of moral language. Some examples: Ralph Wedgewood[17] gives a conceptual role semantics for the 'ought' operator, in which acceptance of an ought-proposition '$O_{<me,t>}(p)$' where '*me*' picks out the speaker and '*t*' refers to some time in the present or near future, commits the speaker to making *p* part of her ideal plan about what to do at *t*. Accepting the proposition 'I ought to bath the baby when I get home' commits the speaker, in the sense explained above, to make bathing the baby when he gets home part of his ideal plan; this in turn commits him to bathing the baby when he gets home. Alan Gibbard[18], in a similar vein, understands ought claims in terms of "plans": 'If I judge that Caesar ought not to have crossed the Rubicon, my so judging amounts to planning, if in Caesar's shoes, not to cross.'[19] Planning here is intimately connected with willing. Most directly of all, Robert Brandom[20] explains ought-claims in terms of expressing commitments—also in the sense explained above—to act in various ways. I take it here that any account of moral thought or language which denies that accepting moral claims involves undertaking commitments to acting or not acting in various ways is seriously defective. In the end though, it is not a very important premise. A slightly different argument, with a slightly narrower scope could be run which avoids it altogether. Instead of saying that undertaking moral commitments involves undertaking commitments to action, we could simply talk about undertaking commitments to act in line with one's moral commitments. Doing this would be irrational if it were impossible to act in line with one's moral commitments. Moral practice would still be an irrational endeavour; and that would be a bad enough result for someone who did not believe in an external source of redemptive power.

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[16] Note that this issue is logically distinct from that of whether the *meaning* of moral claims resides in *expressing* commitments (as opposed to *describing* how things stand with moral properties). This is also distinct from the issue of whether accepting a moral claim *motivates* the person who accepts it to act in accordance with it. What I'm claiming here is compatible with the claim that one can undertake a commitment to act without being motivated to do so.

[17] *The Nature of Normativity* (New York: OUP, 2007).

[18] *Thinking How to Live* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003); *Meaning and Normativity* (Oxford: OUP, 2013).

[19] Meaning and Normativity, p.170.

[20] *Making it Explicit* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994) and *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000).

4. Perfect Virtue

Moser is clear that perfect virtue is not something that people can obtain on their own, in the absence of external assistance:

> [H]umans need help, particularly helpful power, from God to overcome the world's pull toward unrighteousness. The helpful power would be an antidote, at least for willing humans, to unrighteousness.[21]

> The transformation of humans in divine redemption would oppose moral self-sufficiency in humans. Accordingly, it would oppose any presumption of humans being good *on their own*. Instead, it would aim for moral transformation *in human companionship with God*.[22]

> Owing to moral weakness ... humans cannot live up to God's moral character by themselves. They therefore fall short of perfectly obeying divine commands to live God fully and to love others unselfishly.[23]

Perfect virtue, for Moser, is a matter of living in accordance with *agapē*, which he describes as 'noncoercively willing (at least when the opportunity arises) what is good rather than bad for all concerned, including one's enemies, without treating oneself as more deserving than others of good treatment.'[24] A commitment to *agapē* is something very onerous indeed. Authentic *agapē* in a person would involve them willing the good even of enemies, people who have treated them badly, without treating, in practice, their own good as being of more importance than others. It is an interesting feature of the argument that it only applies to people who are incapable of perfect virtue from their own power, since if someone was capable of this they could rationally undertake moral commitments without presupposing the existence of external redemptive help. Yet, honest self-reflection (at least by this author) supports Moser's claim that we have 'considerable evidence to doubt that genuine *agapē* is solely at the discretion of human power, as if a human could exercise unselfish love, including enemy-love, always at will, self-sufficiently.'[25]

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[21] *Severity*, p.40.2
[22] Ibid., p.49.
[23] Ibid., p.50.
[24] Ibid., p.67
[25] Ibid., p68. See also *The Evidence for God,* pp. 203-4.

5. Commitment to perfect virtue

Perfect virtue is not something we can achieve on our own. But there is an interesting objection to Kant's argument that carries over to the one at hand, which tries to weaken the link between discharging one's moral commitments and being perfectly virtuous. Perhaps it is possible to discharge all of our moral commitments without being perfectly virtuous (even by one's own lights). The thought here is that perfect virtue is an *asymptotic* goal; one that we commit ourselves to strive towards but not to actually achieve. Asymptotic goals are used to point us in a direction, but it is the direction, rather than the thing to which they point, which gives them their purpose. We have no obligations to attain asymptotic goals; instead we use them to regulate our actions in various ways. The claim that perfect virtue is an asymptotic goal goes beyond the claim that moral development is always or almost always a *diachronic* rather than a *synchronic* affair. Moral development usually takes time, but this is not the claim made here. An asymptote is a line that *cannot* be reached. Our question is whether moral goodness could be an asymptotic goal of this sort. Peter Byrne has argued that this is a possibility:

> Why can we not seek the highest good through moral endeavour believing that it cannot be attained, but using the notion of the highest good as a regulative principle and an asymptotic goal? Readers may be assured that the writing of this volume is governed by the goal of producing an error-free book. I know that this goal cannot be achieved, but it is a necessary goal to have.[26]

and

> We have obligations to do particular acts of virtue. If we fail to do those particular acts, we do fail to meet our obligations. But we do not fail in a further obligation to become virtuous. Becoming virtuous is an asymptotic goal. It is one that arises from more specific goals, and it thus necessary but this does not mean that we are guilty if we fail to meet it. [...] Thus our duty is merely to do our best to be virtuous. ... We do not need to give up the goal of being virtuous if we recognize only the obligation to achieve the best available approximation to a state of

[26] *Kant on God* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), pp.95-6.

> complete virtue. We can have a regulative end without a corresponding obligation.[27]

This is an interesting objection, but there are good reasons why I think it is not, in the end, cogent. Byrne claims that his goal of writing an error-free book is an asymptotic one—and perhaps it is—but as we noted before, what is at issue is not whether we have any asymptotic goals whatsoever, but whether moral goodness is an asymptotic goal; so the example does little to motivate this claim. More seriously, there are three reasons why the claim does not undermine the *absurdum practicum*. Firstly, as Byrne himself notes, it puts pressure on the 'ought' implies 'can' principle. Yet the principle is not merely eminently plausible; a rejection of it is of dubious coherence. Secondly, it is incoherent to say that we have obligations to particular acts of virtue but that we are not obligated to be virtuous. Thirdly, even if, contrary to what is conceptually possible, virtue were an asymptotic goal, a corresponding argument could be constructed with the same conclusion as the argument under consideration here.

5.1 'Ought' implies 'can'

Since asymptotic goals cannot be achieved, treating moral goodness as an asymptotic goal involve denying the 'ought' implies 'can' principle, but denying the principle means severing the link between responsibility and moral wrongdoing. Moral shortcoming is inherently bound up with culpability, blameworthiness and consanguineous ideas. A person cannot be morally defective whilst not being culpable. (In this way moral assessment is different from other kinds of normative assessment—epistemic assessment, for example.) Taking perfect virtue as an asymptotic goal requires us to be able to criticise people as morally defective for things which lie outwith their control. But moral approbation and opprobrium are notions that only get a grip with respect to agency; denying that 'ought' implies 'can' is incoherent. It also excludes obviously true explanations of why, in particular scenarios, agents are not morally blameworthy for bad events. The correct explanation for why a human person is not blameworthy for preventing a volcanic eruption that destroys a village is that she could not have prevented the eruption, but this explanation is not available to those who deny the principle.

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[27] "Moral Arguments for the Existence of God", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2007. Available at http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/moral-arguments-god/

5.2 Particular obligations and virtuousness

Byrne does not want to deny that we have obligations to individual acts of virtue, only that there is no further obligation to become virtuous. Byrne is, I think, right to say that there is no further obligation to be virtuous, but wrong to conclude that we are not guilty if we are not virtuous. To see why this is so, we need to distinguish between having a further obligation to be virtuous (in addition to our particular moral obligations) and being obligated to be virtuous (as a result of our particular moral obligations). The first says that apart from particular obligations, there is an extra obligation to be virtuous. The second says that our particular obligations are sufficient to make it the case that if we fail to live up to them we fail to be virtuous. The first is false and the second is true. To see this, note that being virtuous consists in living up to one's particular moral obligations, or, to put things the other way, discharging one's moral commitments is constitutive of being virtuous. A person is perfectly virtuous if and only if he meets all of his particular moral obligations. A person then is guilty if he fails to be perfectly virtuous, since he will have failed to meet at least one of his particular moral obligations. If perfect virtue is impossible from one's own strength then meeting all of one's particular moral obligations is also impossible from one's own strength. In which case it is irrational to undertake all of one's particular moral commitments without believing in an external source of redemptive power or sanctification.

Now, it may be the case that there are more involved notions of virtue of which it is not true to say that being virtuous is equivalent to discharging all of one's particular moral obligations. Virtue perhaps involves things like having the right sorts of sentiments; a love of, and not just a doing-of, the good. No matter, we can neologize. Let's say:

S is virtuous* iff_{df} S discharges all of her moral commitments.

We can then talk of virtue* rather than virtue, and the argument can be run in terms of virtue* and virtuousness*. Undertaking moral commitments involves undertaking a commitment to be virtuous*. Yet we know we cannot be virtuous* from our own strength, and so it is irrational to undertake all our *particular* moral commitments without believing in an external source of redemptive power or sanctification.

5.3 Moral commitments to duties

We can distinguish between 'duties', as *general* prescriptions to act in kinds of ways—such as the duties to unselfishness or *agapē*—and 'obligations' as *particular* cases of being morally bound to act—such as the obligation to comfort one's distressed child on a particular occasion. 'Ought's attach to both duties and obligations. This suggests a more simpleminded problem with Byrne's objection. We undertake moral commitments not just to particular deeds (corresponding to what we take our obligations to be) but to general dispositions (corresponding to what we take our duties to be), for instance the disposition to *agapē*. But discharging that commitment is tantamount to perfect virtue. So the issue of whether individual obligations produce a commitment to perfect virtue can be bypassed.

5.4 Tending towards virtuousness

Finally, even if, contrary to fact as I see it, it was coherent to think of virtue as an asymptotic goal, the argument could be simply reconstructed to accommodate this. I noted Byrne's claim above that '[w]e do not need to give up the goal of being virtuous if we recognise only the obligation to achieve the best available approximation to a state of complete virtue'; but this itself—some kind of ideal trajectory towards perfect virtue—would be an impossibly arduous task in the same way that perfect virtue itself would be. The reasons for thinking that we are incapable of perfect virtue from our own strength alone would carry over mutatis mutandis to the ideal trajectory towards perfect virtue. If perfect *agapē* is impossible by human strength alone, why think that a perfect advance towards perfect *agapē* is so possible? Perfect moral achievements require outside help, but so too does perfect moral striving.

5.5 Moral Commitments and the mere possibility of sanctification

Although it is clear that undertaking commitments to act in ways one knows are impossible is irrational, there is a second interesting objection, again from Byrne, to the effect that this is not sufficient to ground the claim that a commitment to perfect virtue presupposes the actual existence of a source of redemptive power. Why think that the source of redemptive power need be actual when all that is required for the rationality of a commitment is that it be

possible to discharge? Surely all that is in fact required is that it is possible that a source of redemptive power exists:

> [T]he structure of the moral argument requires no more than that God is possible. If we have an obligation to promote the highest good, the 'ought' implies 'can' principle merely shows that the highest good must be possible of attainment. It will be so possible if it is possible that there is a source of moral teleology in reality. All the moral argument needs is the inward insurance that the highest good can be attained through moral effort. It can be so attained if it is possible that there is a God with the traditional attributes.[28]

Byrne does not specify what sort of possibility he has in mind, but this has an impact on how we are to understand the objection. If we are dealing with meta-physical possibility then the claim that it is possible that source of redemptive power exists is equivalent to the claim that there exists a possible world in which a source of redemptive power exists. This though is clearly not sufficient to rationally undertake the goal of moral perfection, since the existence of a source of redemptive power at some possible world does not make redemption achievable at the actual world. Redemption is only achievable at those worlds in which sources of redemptive power are actual, since the source of redemptive power is something the agents must access and hence interact with.[29] Worlds in which moral redemption is possible in the relevant sense (i.e. achievable) then will be a subset of those in which moral redemption is a future contingent of the actual world. The relevant sense of possibility here is practical possibility. Practical possibility would be indexed to an agent S, a world *w* and a time *t*. Whether some goal Γ was practically possible for S at *w* at *t* would depend on features of *w* at *t* (including features of S herself). One way to cash this out would be in terms of causal powers: Γ is possible$_{<S,w,t>}$ iff there is some aggregate of things at *w* at *t* that could bring it about that S achieves Γ.[30]

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[28] *Kant on God*, p.91.

[29] None of this rules out the possibility that there are worlds in which agents are capable of achieving moral perfection from their own efforts. These worlds still require the existence of a source of redemptive power, but, in these cases, this source would be internal to the agent. At worlds such as ours, where human agents are not capable of moral perfection from their own efforts, this must be an *external* source of redemptive power.

[30] See, for example, Alexander Pruss's account of possibility in terms of causal powers, in which 'a non-actual state of affairs is made possible by something capable of initiating a chain of causes leading up to that state of affairs.' (*Actuality, Possibility, and Worlds* (Continuum, 2011), p. 213).

However this is eventually cashed out though, the point for our purposes is clear: for perfect virtue and, hence, moral redemption to be possible in the relevant sense, requires the actual existence of a redemptive power. In the end, the metaphysical possibility of a source of redemptive power is not sufficient for persons to undertake moral commitments for the same reasons that the metaphysical possibility of unicorns is not sufficient for you or I to undertake to catch one.

What of epistemic possibility? A claim φ is epistemically possible for an agent S iff φ is not ruled out by anything S knows. [31]The mere metaphysical possibility of a source of redemptive power was not enough to establish the possibility of moral redemption, in the relevant sense, and here something similar can be said. It should be noted that epistemic possibility of a source of redemptive power is enough to establish the epistemic possibility of moral redemption. It is not coherent to hold that a source of redemptive power is not ruled out by anything S knows but that eventual moral redemption is ruled out by something S knows. A source of redemptive power just is something that can bring about moral redemption, and it is not coherent to hold both that there might be something that brings about my moral redemption and that it is not the case that I might be morally redeemed.

If the epistemic possibility of a redeemer was all that is required to rationally undertake a commitment to moral perfection then our argument would still have some interest: it would show that one cannot rationally engage in moral practice if one knows that there is no source of redemptive power. But this is not all that is required; something more than the epistemic possibility of Γ is needed to rationally undertake a commitment to carry out Γ. It is epistemically possible for me that P = NP[32]. Could one rationally

[31] There are of course different ways of cashing out epistemic possibility. One might, for instance, say that a claim φ is epistemically possible iff φ cannot be ruled out *a priori*. In this sense, it is a bare epistemic possibility that water is not H_2O. Or, we could combine the two conditions and say that φ is epistemically possible for S iff φ cannot be ruled out *a priori* or φ is not ruled out by anything S knows. I have opted for the definition in the text because it seems to me that it captures the most natural way to construe epistemic possibility, and because everything I say about it could be said *mutatis mutandis* with these other kinds of epistemic possibility in mind.

[32] In fact, this is epistemically possible for everyone. Whether P = NP is the question of whether the set of polynomial problems—putting things roughly, the set of problems that are easy to solve—is a subset of the set of nondeterministic polynomial problems—putting things roughly again, the set of problems that are difficult to solve but easy to verify once solved. For example, multiplication is polynomial (P) problem and factoring is a nondeterministic polynomial (NP) problem. Whether all NP problems are in fact P problems remains an unsolved problem (with a reward of $1 million).

undertake a goal that required that P = NP in order to be achieved? This is doubtful, but things are worse still for this objection, since what is required for sanctification is not just the possible truth of a proposition, but de re interaction with the source of redemptive power. A source of redemptive power is the means by which the goal of sanctification can be achieved. For some goal Γ and some unique means of achieving that goal γ, can one rationally undertake to achieve Γ by means γ if it is only epistemically possible that γ exists? It seems not, since an agent would have to take themselves to be making use of or appropriately interacting with γ in order to make Γ achievable. I may want to convince a colleague that P = NP, but know that the only means of doing so is to present her with a proof that P = NP. Clearly the epistemic possibility that a proof exists is not sufficient for me to rationally undertake a commitment to convince my colleague that P = NP in this way; I must know that I can have the proof in hand. A more homely example: one cannot undertake to assemble flat-pack furniture with a screwdriver if one only believes in the epistemic possibility of screwdrivers. The screwdriver must be at hand. In the same way, I may undertake the commitment to lead a blameless life and know that the only way to do so is to interact with some external source of redemptive power, but this rationally requires the actual availability of the redeemer, not its mere epistemic possibility.

6. The advantages of the *absurdum practicum*

I conclude that the argument is eminently defensible. Unlike most moral arguments,[33] this *absurdum practicum* does not presuppose moral realism of any sort, since it has to do not with moral facts or properties, but with moral *practice*—our commitments to act in particular ways. The argument gets a grip with the kind of moral expressivist who holds that the fundamental explanation of why some moral claims are true and others false has to do with our own attitudes and sentiments. It also applies to moral relativists, subjectivists, error theorists and fictionalists. Heavy-duty metaphysical moral facts are irrelevant here; just *going in for the game of morality* is what gets the argument off the ground. This gives it a certain dialectical advantage over other moral arguments. But the argument also is in line with Moser's positive vision for philosophy. Philosophy can be a distraction from what really matters:

[33] See, for example, M. Linville, 'The Moral Argument', in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

> One such diversion occurs when a philosophy, perhaps even a philosophy called "Christian," ignores the redemptive importance of Gethsemane union with the inward Christ. If attention is directed away from such union, as with most philosophy, one easily can neglect the importance of such union for human redemption.[34]

The *absurdum practicum* though does not direct attention away from this, since it is this very fact that, so I argue here, is presupposed by our moral practices. As a piece of ramified natural theology then, it meets Moser's litmus test:

> A test question arises for any proposed Christian philosophy: does the philosophy uphold the importance of one's obediently dying with Christ under the guiding agent-power of God as "Abba, Father"? If not, then the philosophy misses the mark as a distinctively Christian philosophy.[35]

A final issue presents itself. The argument is for rational commitment to a redeemer, but there is the matter of how this redeemer is to be characterised. Need a redeemer of this sort be a God worthy of worship? The step from redeemer to God is the one that is borrowed from Moser, but it is also that which is in need of most clarification and defence. Recall Moser's claim:

> The genuine offer and the human reception of the transformative gift ... require a divine source that has the power of thoroughgoing forgiveness and transformation of willing humans to a new volitional center of *default unselfish love and forgiveness toward all people*. Indeed, it is part of the concept of the transformative gift, as characterized, that the source of this gift (when this gift is real) is a powerful divine authority of thoroughgoing forgiveness who is worthy of worship.[36]

Why hold, as Moser does, that it is 'part of the concept' of the morally transformative gift, that's it's source be divine and worthy of worship? This author is not entirely sure, but perhaps the answer is something like the following. There is something mysterious about external sources of redemptive power. How can a transaction of this sort work? We cannot be impelled to moral goodness without ceasing to be authentically moral agents. But there is also something deeply familiar about it. We are improved by the love of

[34] *Severity*, p.182.
[35] Ibid.
[36] *The Evidence for God*, p.204.

spouses, parents, siblings, children and good friends, if we allow ourselves to be. Perhaps complete sanctification or redemption by this sort of transaction—the sort of sanctification capable of producing perfect virtue—requires perfect love. God is this unending wellspring of infinite love. Sanctification isn't only Good News, it is a presupposition of one of the most fundamental of human practices; and this might be the fact that opens up the possibility of ramified natural theology, the Moser way.

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