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Beyond Spectator Evidence to Pneumatic Evidence: Reply to Charles Taliaferro

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Abstract. Charles Taliaferro has suggested that the epistemology underlying my approach to Christ-shaped philosophy is unduly negative toward natural theology. This reply identifies a problem with the cogency of natural theology that underwrites my negative stance toward it. The reply also motivates my view of pneumatic evidence for God, and suggests that such evidence is unduly neglected by philosophers. In addition, it counters an objection from Taliaferro regarding my approach to death.

God and Spectator Evidence

One of the most important questions for religious epistemology is this: what kind of evidence of God’s reality, if any, should we expect God to give us? The answer will depend on God’s character and purposes, in particular, on what would be God’s purposes in giving evidence of divine reality to humans. If God is worthy of worship and hence inherently morally perfect, then God will be perfectly redemptive toward human lives, and not *just* (a) the first cause or the ground of all contingent events, (b) the designer of order in the universe, (c) the fine-tuner of the physical universe, (d) the ground of agency, consciousness, or morality, or (e) the simplest explanatory postulate for a specified range of data. Natural theology rests its case for God on such features as (a)–(e), and its arguments come in many different forms and sizes. Indeed, it enjoys a small industry of supporters among past and present philosophers of religion.

I understand “natural theology” in terms of a range of *arguments* for God’s existence involving features (a)–(e), without reliance on any supernatural evidence for God. The latter clause is crucial to *natural* theology in contrast

with *supernatural* theology. Arguments for God's existence are not just *evidence* for God's existence, because one can have evidence for God's existence without having an argument for God's existence. For instance, I can have a religious experience of God's intervening in my life even if I do not have an argument for God's existence. In addition, such an experience can supply evidence for me that justifies my belief in God if I have no evidence that defeats, or undermines, the former experiential evidence. So, we should not confuse evidence for God's existence and an argument for God's existence. I endorse evidentialism about belief in God, holding that belief in God can and should rest on undefeated evidence. I deny, however, that the familiar arguments from natural theology, invoking such features as (a)–(e), are cogent, at least for many reasonable people who have reflected on them. In particular, I deny that they cogently yield a perfectly redemptive personal God who is worthy of worship.¹⁺

Given that the familiar arguments of natural theology fail to convince many reasonable people, one should ask what the aims and limits of such arguments are. Even if they are convincing for their proponents, one should ask what their failure to convince many others, even many theists, shows. Does it show that the unconvinced people share a rational deficit? If so, what exactly constitutes and accounts for this deficit? Is there a genuine deficit of rationality here? In any case, it is difficult to identify, in a non-questionbegging way, a deficit in the rationality of those who are unconvinced. Alternatively, then, we should ask whether the arguments themselves might have a shortcoming that leaves them unconvincing to many inquirers. I submit that they do.

A perfectly redemptive God would have no reason to seek to have humans believe that God exists without challenging them to conform to his will. The familiar arguments of natural theology assume otherwise, without offering any support for this questionable assumption. Neither mere belief that God exists nor belief that God exists on the basis of a questionable argument has genuine redemptive value. As the writer of the epistle of James remarks: “Even the demons believe—and shudder” (Jas. 2:19, NRSV). Let us speak of *spectator evidence* for *X* as evidence for *X* that permits one's being a spectator toward *X* without any challenge to yield one's will to *X*. The familiar arguments

¹ For details, see Paul Moser, *The Evidence for God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), ch. 3, and my previous installment in this series, “On Traditional Philosophy and Natural Theology: A Rejoinder” (<http://bit.ly/ChristShapedPhilosophyProject>).

of natural theology offer, at most, spectator evidence for God in their premises, but such evidence does not agree with or point to the challenging moral character of a perfectly redemptive God. In failing to point to such a moral character, the evidence in question fails to point to a God worthy of worship, even if it points somehow to a god of deism or mere theism.

An epistemology for the reality of God should fit with the moral character of God as required by the perfectionist title “God.” The latter title entails worthiness of worship and hence moral perfection and redemptive perfection. In addition, we can use this title without assuming that God actually exists and therefore without begging key questions against critics of theism. The God and Father of Jesus Christ is arguably the best candidate for this title, and, in any case, there are not many viable candidates available. This is a striking fact of human history, but it is a clear fact. Nearly all available candidates for God manifest serious moral defects and thereby fall short of the perfectionist title “God.” So, the job of sifting from the candidates is not, after all, terribly difficult. We cannot become lost in a plethora of viable candidates, because there is no such plethora.

Natural Theology and God’s Evidence

Charles Taliaferro worries that “it is just a tad misleading to think that those (mostly natural theologians like [Richard] Swinburne) who build a case for theism on the grounds of the impartial pursuit of the truth are akin to those who might expect God to produce ‘fireworks or at least pomp and circumstance!’” I submit, however, that this is not misleading at all, once we specify how the two approaches are “akin” to each other. We now can specify: the two are akin in seeking and offering what I have called “spectator evidence” for God, that is, evidence failing to challenge one to yield one’s will to a personal redemptive God worthy of worship. Such evidence is inadequate for, and out of character with, a God worthy of worship. Perhaps it fits the character of some lesser god, but that is a different matter.

The problem, from the perspective of a God worthy of worship, is that spectator evidence does not challenge the direction of one’s will relative to God. As a result, it allows the evidence for God to be volitionally irrelevant. This is an odd, unacceptable result. Spectator evidence for God makes no divine claim on human wills, as if God offered evidence for God’s reality that is

just an object or topic for spectators without volitional alienation from God. Such evidence may be fitting for a god of deism, but it does not preserve the inherent moral perfection and redemptive excellence of the God worthy of worship. So, I do find that the evidence of “natural theology [is] really akin to an exaltation of a human being,” given its assumption that humans can approach (the evidence for) God without a serious volitional challenge from God.

Taliaferro proposes that “natural theologians ... are like explorers searching for something truly worthwhile.” Perhaps they are, but they set the standard of evidence too low for a God worthy of worship. In particular, this proposal neglects that *God* would *first* seek for humans in a manner that aims to redeem them from their alienation from God. This is a distinctive feature of the God and Father of Jesus Christ. In particular, a morally perfect God would first come to humans to make a challenging redemptive claim on them in their position of alienation from God. This God would be self-authenticating by his own self-manifestation, because this God’s morally perfect character could not be authenticated by anything else; everything else would pale in comparison. In alienation from God, humans would not be competent explorers for God, and therefore they would need God first to come to them. This is at the heart of the biblical message of divine (cognitive) grace in the Old and New Testaments. In addition, once God does come to humans in self-authenticating interventions (such as in Jesus Christ), humans have no need for the inadequate, wobbly arguments of natural theology. The biblical God, then, should not be confused with the god of the philosophers and natural theologians.

Taliaferro’s metaphor of natural theologians as explorers looking for a cure for a disease gets the story backwards, if we are talking about the God worthy of worship. It puts the cart before the horse. A perfectly redemptive God would lead the search, his search, *for us humans*. We humans would be the quarry of “the hound from heaven,” the divine explorer looking for us. We would be the ones to be found, if we are willing. This is the lesson of Jesus in his parable of the lost sheep (Lk. 15:4–5, Matt. 18:12–13), and it fits with the character of a morally perfect God toward people out of communion with God. It fits, moreover, with the story line of the Old and New Testaments regarding a God in search of humans, even before they search for God. This story line contrasts sharply with the evidential story of natural theology, and therefore the arguments of natural theology play no role whatever in the Old

and New Testaments. The latter fact merits more attention than it receives from advocates of natural theology.

Taliaferro suggests that “Moser’s position cannot dispense with what Swinburne termed a credulity principle”: that is, “if some state of affairs appears to you to be the case (and there is no reason not to trust that the appearance is reliable) then it is reasonable to believe that the state of affairs obtains.” He adds that “the fact (assuming this is a fact) that many persons report what seems like the reality of God becoming manifest to them can and should be considered evidence that God exists....” I dissent from both of these claims. Regarding the second claim, “the fact that many persons report” something about their experience is not evidence for the truth of what they report. Mere reports, like mere beliefs or mere claims, about experiencing God do not constitute evidence for God; nor do mere reports to the contrary constitute defeaters of evidence for God. Mere reports and beliefs need an evidential base to figure in actual evidence or defeat of evidence. Otherwise, evidence would be much too easy to come by, and pretty much anything could be reasonable. Epistemic reasonableness excludes such arbitrariness. Regarding the first claim, about a credulity principle, I have expressed dissent from such a principle in *The Evidence for God*.² Such a principle evidently assumes that reality is probably the ways things appear to us to be, if there is no reason to question this. I suggest, however, that our best science can present subtle evidence independent of (some) ordinary experiences and commonsense beliefs (such as evidence in subatomic physics regarding the constituents of physical objects) that challenges a commonsense belief resting on a principle of credulity.³ My own perspective, as developed in *Knowledge and Evidence*, implies that empirical justification is conferred by considerations of best available explanation, and not by a principle of credulity. As a result, I am able to offer a response to skeptics that does not rely simply on an appeal to ordinary experience and common sense. Even so, a principle of credulity would not open the door to any of the arguments of natural theology. One could accept such a principle but abstain from those arguments given the misgivings noted previously.

² Moser, *The Evidence for God*, pp. 206-7.

³ For elaboration see: Philip Wiebe, *God and Other Spirits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 142-44.

The familiar reliance on natural theology neglects a key feature of the epistemology for God's reality found in the New Testament: its reliance on the cognitive value of God's intervening Spirit. In other words, the New Testament offers a *pneumatic* redemptive approach to the evidence for God that contrasts with the reliance on spectator evidence in natural theology. This pneumatic approach fits nicely with the conception of a redemptive God worthy of worship. The apostle Paul remarks as follows: "God ... has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee (*arrabōn*; 2 Cor. 1:21–22, RSV). Likewise, Paul refers to "God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee (*arrabōn*; 2 Cor. 5:5, RSV; cf. Eph. 1:13–14). The relevant notion of "guarantee" has an evidential component, signifying that God's Spirit indicates to us the reality and faithfulness of God.

Paul amplifies his key cognitive insight as follows: "Hope [in God] does not disappoint us, because God's love (*agapē*) has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5). Paul would say the same about belief in God. He here excludes *cognitive* or *evidential* disappointment, on the basis of the self-manifestation of God's character of *agapē* via his Spirit. Such a self-manifestation, I have proposed, is self-authenticating of God's reality and character. *God* does the needed evidential work by his self-manifestation that self-authenticates his reality (see Rom. 10:20; cf. Gen. 22:16–17, Isa. 45:22–23, Matt. 16:16–17). Given God's unique moral character and status, only God can decisively authenticate God's reality and character. In doing so, God provides a self-manifestation that is inherently personal because it is inherently agent-based and agent-oriented. So, the familiar arguments of natural theology not only lack cogency for many reasonable people, but also are beside the point, if the point is a God worthy of worship.⁴

Paul *could* have said that our guarantee of God's reality arises from some argument of natural theology involving: (a) the first cause or the ground of all contingent events, (b) the designer of order in the universe, (c) the fine-tuner of the physical universe, (d) the ground of agency, consciousness, or morality, or (e) the simplest explanatory postulate for a specified range of data. He did not, however, because he acknowledged the important lesson that the true God is

⁴ For elaboration on the theme of this paragraph see: Paul Moser, *The Severity of God* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013) and my forthcoming paper "God without Argument."

self-authenticating via the self-manifestation of his perfect moral character of *agapē*. This self-authentication, including the accompanying self-manifestation, comes courtesy of God's intervening Spirit, via whom God pours his transforming *agapē* into the hearts of cooperative recipients. As a result, Paul has no need for the arguments of natural theology. They are wobbly, dubious, unreliable, and impotent in ways that the intervening Spirit of God is not. Paul's skeptical attitude toward natural theology is shared by the other New Testament writers. So, philosophical theists, in relying on natural theology, are out of line with those writers and their pneumatic redemptive epistemology. A big part of the problem, I suspect, is that philosophical theists are not sufficiently steeped in the profound writings of the New Testament, including its pneumatic epistemology. As a result, they sell their epistemological birthright for a tenuous counterfeit. Perhaps they want something more tangible than God's own Spirit to impress their secular peers who exalt arguments above God himself. If so, they fail on both fronts: God's and that of their secular peers. The house of cards known as natural theology crashes to the ground, with no real loss, given divine self-authentication to cooperative humans.

Moving beyond epistemology, Taliaferro offers the following comment on death: "My death is not a thing or, strictly speaking, not a part of my life.... Dying is a process, but my death will be the end of my life (or the end of me in this life).... Strictly speaking, death cannot announce things or make wake-up calls or triumph over anything." It is unclear what motivates this comment, but my own alternative position seeks to accommodate the following remark of the author of the letter to the Hebrews: "[Christ] himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14, NRSV). In this view, death *is* a powerful thing, under the powers of darkness, and it is part of one's spiritual life as a counter to what God in Christ seeks to proliferate: redemptive life with God. I acknowledge the cosmic conflict portrayed in the New Testament, including in the Pauline writings: "Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm." (Eph. 6:12–13, NRSV). This struggle is largely ignored by philosophers of religion, but it has a central role in New Testament Christianity.

“To stand firm” with God should indeed be our goal as humans willing to cooperate with the redemptive God who seeks, through Jesus Christ, life rather than death for us humans (see Jn. 3:16–17). The only way to stand firm is to go through our own Gethsemane with Christ, where we can face God in conscience, and resolve the following with Christ: “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what *You* want” (Mk. 14:36, NRSV, italics added). We can meet God in Gethsemane, but not in natural theology. God self-authenticates his reality and character in Gethsemane, but not in natural theology. God manifests himself in Gethsemane, but not in natural theology. God gives us life with himself in Gethsemane, but not in natural theology. In Gethsemane, we can let God be God by putting God’s will first. We thereby move beyond the impotence of typical philosophy into powerful new life with God.

We become children of the living God as we let go of our philosophical (and other) pretensions. Christ-shaped philosophy points us in this direction, because its underlying epistemology is Gethsemane epistemology. It acknowledges the role of God’s Spirit in calling humans, via conscience, to yield their wills to God’s will. This is where we find salient evidence for God, without any reliance on the arguments of natural theology. The remaining question is whether we are willing to yield to God in Gethsemane. Our answer to that question will determine whether we are genuinely open to receiving ever-deepening evidence for the God who is perfectly redemptive and makes all things new.

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