

On Traditional Philosophy and Natural Theology: A Rejoinder

Paul K. Moser
Department of Philosophy
Loyola University Chicago
Chicago, Illinois

Abstract. In the western world, at least, talk of “Christian philosophy” leads eventually to questions about (a) the relation of Christian philosophy to traditional philosophy outside a Christian context and (b) a potential role for the arguments of “natural theology.” This series of papers on Christ-Shaped Philosophy has arrived at such questions, as we should have expected. This rejoinder offers some reflections on such questions, in keeping with a distinctively Christian philosophy.

1. Reply to Partain

One might offer an approach to “Christian philosophy” that is altogether pessimistic and dismissive toward traditional philosophy. I would not recommend this sweeping option, but one mistakenly could ascribe it to a proponent of a distinction between “the god of the philosophers” and “the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus.” I can imagine one ascribing this extreme option to Blaise Pascal, for instance, but I would regard that as unjustified. What then of traditional philosophy outside Christian philosophy?

In his helpful paper, “Christian Philosophy and Philosophy’s Perennial Problems,” Joseph N. Partain offers a conciliatory approach, as follows:

I will state at the outset that the history and content of philosophy as it deals with all these questions [of traditional philosophy] is both valuable and worthy of Christian engagement as a discipline. In some qualified sense, I think, even Moser himself would admit as much. On the other hand (to take Moser's side), as a Christian I have long believed that philosophy as “the love of wisdom” is, properly speaking, *the love of Christ* (that is, there is one wisdom, one philosophy).

I would indeed recommend some qualification, because I do not regard all of traditional philosophy as either intrinsically valuable or redemptively valuable. One big issue concerns what we are going to include in “traditional philosophy.” Is the philosophy of Hegel to be included? Is that of Nietzsche? Why not? Their work in philosophy is regularly taught to students, even undergraduates, in many large philosophy departments, and many philosophers value their work as philosophy. I am not convinced, however, that their work is either intrinsically valuable or redemptively valuable. As for what is instrumentally valuable, this matter will depend on the purposes people have, and these purposes can vary widely.

Partain offers his own take: “as a Christian I have long believed that philosophy as ‘the love of wisdom’ is, properly speaking, *the love of Christ* (that is, there is one wisdom, one philosophy).” He elaborates as follows:

What [the apostle] Paul finds objectionable is not the pursuit of wisdom itself. Nor is he suggesting that there are two wisdoms rather than one. Instead, the problem seems to be that the Greeks sought this wisdom *in themselves* (let's say, their own reason or resources) apart from Christ and Scripture.

There is an important truth here, but we need to clarify it a bit more. The matter depends on how “wisdom” is individuated. Paul actually does contrast two different kinds of *wisdom*: “a wisdom of this age” and “a secret and hidden wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 2:6–7). He adds that if “the rulers of this age” had understood the wisdom of God, they “would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:8, RSV).

The central question concerns what constitutes the main difference between Paul’s two kinds of wisdom. One hint comes from Paul’s contrast between “the wisdom of men” and “the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:5), coupled with his identification of Christ with “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). His idea seems to be that wisdom separated from (cooperation with) “the power of God,” particularly the power of God in Christ, is “wisdom of this age.” Accordingly, Paul remarks that “among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age” (1 Cor. 2:6, NRSV).

If we are on the right track, we can say that there are two kinds of “wisdom”: one kind can contribute to the power and purpose of God in Christ; the other kind cannot. For instance, I doubt that the “wisdom” of philosophical nihilists, such as that of Bertrand Russell in “A Free Man’s Worship,” can contribute to what Paul calls the “wisdom of God.” In addition, I doubt that Nietzsche’s “wisdom” regarding the self-sufficient “Superman” can contribute to divine wisdom, particularly the wisdom exemplified in the kenotic Christ. So, not all philosophical “wisdom” can be brought under the authority of Christ as the wisdom of God; some of it is incompatible with his authority. From the perspective of the wisdom of God, then, the history and the content of philosophy outside the authority of Christ are a mixed bag and hence *not* unqualifiedly “valuable,” either intrinsically or redemptively.

One might counter that from a Christian perspective the real problem in philosophy, in the pursuit of wisdom, concerns merely *how* one pursues it, say either self-sufficiently or with God’s guidance. There is a truth in this vicinity, but the present claim is overstated. The mode of pursuit is just part of the problem, and not the whole problem. One can pursue wisdom in a supposedly self-sufficient manner, and that would be misleading and ultimately frustrating, at least from a Christian perspective. Even so, another part of the problem concerns the kind of wisdom that Paul calls “wisdom of this age.” Such wisdom is defective, from a Christian perspective, in virtue of content, and not (just) mode of pursuit. It has no redemptive value from this perspective. So, some of the philosophical *questions* arising from such defective wisdom will lack value from a Christian perspective. Such questions include: How should I be a self-sufficient Superman? And how should I conduct my life in the face of unrelenting nihilism regarding human existence?

It is doubtful, then, that a Christian perspective will allow us to “unify philosophy” with regard to content. Some of what goes under the heading “philosophy” (as content) in academic circles will not fit into a Christian perspective on philosophy and wisdom. It will not fit because it is incompatible with the redemptive purpose and message of God in Christ. I have mentioned two straightforward examples from Russell and Nietzsche, and we easily could produce more examples from the history of philosophy. From a Christian perspective, this history is a mine field, in terms of what can make a redemptive contribution. We are in no position, then, to whitewash traditional philosophy outside the kingdom of God.

My concluding qualification enables an agreement with Partain’s general direction: namely, we Christians should unify all of our philosophy under the authority of Christ, in cooperation with his kingdom under God. Of course, this will include only philosophy compatible with his kingdom, and some content from the history of philosophy will fall by the wayside, as unworthy of Christ. With this qualification, Partain and I seem to be largely in agreement.

2. Reply to Woldeyohannes

My suspicions, from a Christian perspective, about some of traditional philosophy extend to much of natural theology. I find crucial value in evidence from religious *experience* of a distinctive kind, but the rest of natural theology is seriously deficient in making a contribution to Christian philosophy. There is a small industry of philosophers advocating natural theology, and therefore my perspective faces some resistance in the guild of philosophy of religion. I shall explain why this resistance is misplaced.

In “A Missed Opportunity: Reply to Moser,” Tedla Woldeyohannes (hereafter, “TW”) offers a brief for natural theology, but I do not see how it can succeed, given his line of reasoning. He remarks:

Moser thinks that Romans 1: 20–21 does not teach that creation by itself, alone is evidence for a personal God worthy of worship. He writes, “I do not find Paul claiming in Romans 1 that creation *by itself* is such evidence. Instead, Paul claims that ‘God showed them’ about God’s reality via creation, but not via creation *alone*.” Moser, *Philosophia Christi*, Vol. 14, No. 2, p. 310. [Italics in the original] I disagree with Moser’s interpretation of Romans for two reasons: First, I claim that creation by itself, alone is adequate for natural knowledge of God, i.e., that God exists, which does not imply that natural knowledge of God is adequate for salvific purposes.

It is unclear to me how the first reason offered is a reason at all against my position, because it is a mere claim that the position I have offered is false. In other words, merely *claiming* “that creation by itself, alone is adequate for natural knowledge of God, i.e., that God exists” does not supply a *reason* to reject my position. It is, instead, a mere rejection of my position, without a reason supplied. (The second reason given concerns a salvific purpose for

“special revelation” in the bible and the incarnation, and does not bear on my position in any challenging way.)

TW proceeds with further disagreement regarding my misgivings about much of natural theology, as follows:

I do not see any reason to rule out the possibility that God can allow, for some people, use of theistic arguments, as formulations of natural knowledge of God, as *pointers* to the Redeemer, who is also the Creator. To claim that theistic arguments are irrelevant suggests that God would not use a revelation of God as evidence for God’s reality. That does not seem right. Also, even inconclusive evidence of natural theology, which can serve only as a pointer to God’s reality, need not stand in the way of receiving conclusive evidence from God when God decides to provide such evidence for whoever is willing to receive it.

The talk of “pointers” here is too vague to offer any kind of challenge to either agnostics, atheists, or theists suspicious of natural theology. They will need to know, in particular, how “pointers” relate to truth-indicators, reasons, evidence, probability, and the like. In short, they will demand clarification of the alleged *epistemic* status of the so-called pointers and elucidation of how such pointers can contribute to *cogent arguments* of natural theology. I can find no compelling explanations on these fronts.

We can raise a simple unanswered question: pointers *for whom*? It is doubtful that they are pointers for *everyone*, even for every theist. I, for one, am a theist for whom the familiar arguments of natural theology are not pointers at all. So, are they pointers only for people already partial to traditional natural theology? If so, they will have no cognitive value for those of us suspicious of natural theology owing to logical and epistemic misgivings. We need considerable explanation here from friends of natural theology, and there is no straightforward compelling story to tell.

Surprisingly, for all of his enthusiasm for natural theology, TW does not provide any actual argument from natural theology. Until he does, we have at most a promissory note, and the troubled history of natural theology advises against our accepting it. Contrary to TW, the problem here does not concern the familiar distinction between redemptive knowledge of God and natural knowledge of God. Instead, it concerns whether there is a *cogent* argument of natural theology for people who are not already committed to theism. It is not helpful in this highly controversial area simply to assume that there is.

TW offers the following as a supporting reason: “To claim that theistic arguments are irrelevant suggests that God would not use a revelation of God as evidence for God’s reality.” This is a puzzling remark. Actually, my claim about the defectiveness of much of natural theology does not suggest this in any way. On the contrary, my approach to divine evidence focuses, almost exclusively, on a direct, self-manifesting “revelation of God.” I shall develop this point briefly. (I have much more to say about the topic in connection with natural theology in my forthcoming paper “God without Argument.”)

God could provide conclusive evidence for God’s reality to humans by a divine self-manifestation, without any human reliance on an argument. If this evidence for God’s reality does not have an undefeated defeater, it could satisfy the evidence condition for knowledge of God’s reality. In that case, a person’s evidence and knowledge of God’s reality would not depend on an argument possessed by that person. Accordingly, such evidence and knowledge would not depend on one’s having or presenting an argument for either God’s reality or one’s knowledge of God’s reality.

Given the moral character of a perfectly redemptive God worthy of worship, this God would take the redemptive initiative toward humans, both in favoring humans and in seeking a redemptive and cognitive relationship with them. So, God would come to cooperative humans with direct, self-manifesting evidence of divine reality. Otherwise, humans would be at a loss to acquire salient evidence of God’s reality. We have no cogent argument to fill the gap.

God would have no good reason to produce or support arguments that bind agents, on pain of irrationality, to acknowledge God’s existence. Specifically, a divine redemptive plan would not suffer if, apart from direct experiential evidence from God, humans rationally could withhold judgment regarding God’s existence. In that case, humans would not be rationally bound by any argument to acknowledge God’s existence. As redemptive, God would seek a kind of *volitional* cooperation from humans, and arguments for God’s existence would have no essential role in that goal. Advocates of natural theology typically ignore this consideration.

The self-manifestation of God’s distinctive character of *agapē* could awaken faith in God for a suitably cooperative human. In the absence of defeaters, this self-manifestation could supply conclusive evidence in support of such faith in God. Faith in God then would have an evidential ground in human experience (of God), and it would not be self-induced or groundless. So, faith in God could be above reproach, cognitively, without relying on any argument of natural theology.

As an intentional causal agent, God could authenticate his own reality and character for humans. This self-authentication would include God's self-manifesting his distinctive moral character to humans (perhaps in conscience) and producing traits of this character in the experiences and lives of cooperative recipients. So, as a self-manifesting agent with a unique, morally perfect character, God could be self-evidencing and self-authenticating toward humans.¹ This neglected view does not reduce to the dubious view that a subjective human experience is self-authenticating regarding God.

The Christian God, as the supreme, perfect authority, would ultimately testify to himself, via the Spirit of the risen Christ, God's own image. Neither mere claims nor mere subjective experiences are self-attesting about objective reality in a convincing manner. As an intentional causal agent, however, God would be self-authenticating in being self-manifesting and self-witnessing regarding God's and Christ's reality and moral character (see Rom. 10:20, Jn. 14:23). This kind of self-authenticating fits with the biblical theme of God's confirming his own reality, given that God inherently has a morally perfect character and cannot find anyone or anything else to serve this purpose (see, for instance, Gen. 22:16–17, Isa. 45:22–23).

My proposed position has major implications for Christian epistemology. It may be called, following James S. Stewart, *the divine self-verification of Christ in conscience*: “this is a very wonderful thing which happens: you begin exploring the fact of Christ, perhaps merely intellectually and theologically – and before you know where you are, the fact is exploring *you*, spiritually and morally.... You set out to see what you can find in Christ, and sooner or later God in Christ finds you. That is the self-verification of Jesus.”² Arguments from natural theology often divert attention from, and obscure the importance of, this kind of experience.

The Christian God would manifest the divine character of *agapē* in (the experience of) receptive humans, pouring out God's enemy-love in their hearts (Rom. 5:5). This is something only God could do; mere humans and counterfeit gods, including imaginary gods, lack the needed power and character. Being *sui generis*, God should be expected by us to be self-attesting and self-witnessing. No other agent has the self-sufficient *agapē* character of enemy-love needed for the task; so, no other agent is worthy of worship or divinely self-manifesting. God's self-attesting would challenge potential

¹ See Moser, *The Severity of God*, chap. 3.

² James Stewart, *The Strong Name* (T&T Clark, 1940), pp. 87-88.

recipients to move toward enemy-love and forgiveness, away from destructive selfishness and pride.

An argument can obscure the importance of directly knowing God, and many uses of arguments by Christian philosophers actually do this. In addition, when familiar theistic arguments come under heavy fire, many critics take this fire to underwrite their agnosticism or atheism. This is misleading, because the key evidence for God is not an argument. *Philosophical* theism relies on some argument of natural theology, and, in this respect, is not to be confused with the theism of the Old and New Testaments. The biblical writers do not offer their theism with arguments from natural theology. In this respect, biblical theism, including its implicit epistemology, differs from philosophical theism. (My current talk of natural theology brackets appeals to experiences of God.)

It is doubtful (at least to many people) that the familiar empirical arguments of natural theology cogently yield a god who is a *personal agent*, let alone a personal agent worthy of worship, even if they yield various impersonal explanatory postulates.³ I can coherently imagine, for instance, an *impersonal* necessary source for a contingent universe and for a seemingly designed and fine-tuned universe, despite the report of some natural theologians that they cannot imagine this. In addition, attempts to use considerations of a “best available explanation” here typically beg key questions about explanation and probability against agnostics, atheists, and even many theists. Moreover, the arguments of natural theology neglect that the God of biblical theism is elusive and hides from humans on occasion. The god of natural theology does not bob and weave in that manner, for the redemptive good of human agents. Accordingly, the arguments of natural theology can easily distract one from an intervening God who offers a redemptive self-manifestation.

Proponents of natural theology would do well to consider the following observation from George Mavrodes:

We are ... interested in whether there is any argument that will prove God's existence to everyone. Such an argument has apparently not yet been invented. If it is to be invented, there must be some set of propositions that everyone knows and that entail, by logical relations that are also known to everyone, that God exists.... [T]here is not much reason to believe that [this] is possible.⁴

³ See Moser, *The Evidence for God*, chap. 3

⁴ George Mavrodes, *Belief in God* (Random House, 1970), p. 46

The arguments of natural theology typically fall short of one of their *apparent* goals: rationally to convince readers who are atheists or agnostics, or at least to move them closer to theism. Are these arguments thus inadequate for their own purpose? Presumably, they are not designed just to satisfy readers already committed to theism.

When philosophical theists present arguments for God's existence, they accept a burden: rationally to convince (some) people who read or hear the arguments. They do not want to give just arguments they deem sound, such as the toothless argument noted by Mavrodes: "Either nothing exists or God exists; something exists; therefore, God exists."⁵ Philosophical theists want to give arguments where acceptance of the premises does not depend on acceptance of the conclusion. They want to give *rationally cogent* arguments for their audience. Otherwise, they could scale back to a smaller group of recipients already agreeable to their conclusion.

Atheists, agnostics, and many theists (myself included) do not find the familiar arguments of natural theology to be cogent, given our evidence. So, a neglected question arises for advocates of natural theology: what is the best available explanation of the impasse between philosophical theists and unconvinced inquirers who are atheists, agnostics, or theists? Does this explanation involve an alleged deficit of rationality or intellect in those of us unconvinced by the arguments? If so, what exactly is this deficit, and how can it be removed, if it can? *Here* is where the natural theologian should direct attention, at a level where we are probing foundational issues, and not just endorsing quick arguments without reflection on the goals of those arguments and their inadequacies regarding cogency.

Finally, advocates of natural theology should avoid insulting the intelligence or the rationality of the many theorists – whether atheist, agnostic, or theist—who are unconvinced by the arguments in question. Instead, they should focus on why their arguments fail to convince a wide range of rationally capable inquirers. My own approach to Christian philosophy is, happily, not burdened with that unhappy duty.

Paul K. Moser is Professor of Philosophy at Loyola University Chicago.

⁵ Mavrodes, *Belief in God*, p. 22.