

USAGE STATEMENT & AGREEMENT

- **This document is the property of the author(s) and of www.epsociety.org.**
- **This document has been made available for your individual usage.**
- **It's possible that the ideas contained in this document are of a "preprint" quality. Please consult the author(s) for any updated content.**
- **If you quote from this document, whether for personal or professional purposes, please give appropriate attribution and link to the original URL whenever you cite it.**
- **Please do not upload or store this document to any personal or organization owned website, intranet, portal, server, FTP area, or any other shared space.**
- **You are permitted to store this document on your own individual, privately-owned computer or device.**
- **By opening this document, you have agreed to abide by the above stated usage policy.**
- ***We welcome your comments and interaction about the ideas shared in this document by going to www.epsociety.org!***

Learning to Converse by Trial and Failure: a Rejoinder to Moser

Aaron Preston
Philosophy Department
Valparaiso University
Valparaiso, IN

Abstract: In response to Moser’s “Gethsemane Epistemology, Pneumatic Evidence, and Divine *Agape*?” I clarify, reiterate, and further develop my critique of his proposal that Gethsemane Epistemology (GE) is definitive of Christian Philosophy. Moser thinks that it deserves this special status in part because of its epistemic superiority to other potential sources of theistic evidence/knowledge, such as Natural Theology (NT). I again argue that it is far from clear that GE enjoys epistemic superiority to NT in any of the ways Moser claims, and hence that it is equally unclear whether it deserves to be regarded as definitive of Christian philosophy. Along the way, I consider whether Moser’s position rests upon a question-begging concept of “worship-worthiness,” whether he gives sufficient weight to the problem of peer-disagreement among Christian thinkers, and whether his Christian inclusivism is consistent with the epistemic superiority he claims for GE.

Upon first hearing about the formation of the American Philosophical Association, William James responded with the following pessimistic observation:

... I don't foresee much good from a philosophical society. Philosophical discussion proper only succeeds between intimates who have learned how to converse by months of weary trial and failure. The philosopher is a lone beast living in his individual burrow. Count me *out!*¹

¹ Quoted in H. N. Gardiner, “The First Twenty-Five Years of the American Philosophical Association,” *The Philosophical Review*, 35:2 (March, 1926), p. 148.

Presumably James later changed his mind about some of this, as he not only joined the APA but became its sixth president. Still, his initial response seems to capture an important truth: it is often very difficult for philosophers to understand one another; it often does seem to require much “weary trial and failure.”

This truth is amply on display here in the *Christ-Shaped Philosophy Project*, where Paul Moser and his critics often seem to be talking past each other. My own exchange with Moser is no exception. Much of what he said in response² to my “On the Purported Superiority of Gethsemane Epistemology,”³ amounts either to the claim that I have failed to understand his views (and have correspondingly mischaracterized them), or to the claim that I have failed to make my own thoughts clear enough to be understood. Not surprisingly, I feel as though Moser missed my meaning in a number of cases. Consequently a main objective here is to explore these failures of understanding, and to try to surmount them where I can.

Now, difficult as it may be for philosophers to understand each other, we sometimes make it harder than it has to be by acting as if a term must be assigned a very precise definition before we can understand it. I don’t know if Moser actually believes this, but many of his complaints about clarity seem to presuppose something like it. For instance, in response to my claim that “the Christian interpretation of conscience” is “reasonable or plausible,” but “not conclusive, as pneumatic evidence is supposed to be,” Moser says that he “cannot tell what Preston means by ‘conclusive,’ and therefore will not pursue that matter, given the various senses of ‘conclusive’ in circulation among philosophers.”⁴ Likewise, he rejects my assumption that the epistemological implications of terms like “self-evident” and “certain” are more familiar than those of his term “self-authenticating” on the grounds that the former terms “are used by philosophers in varying ways.” For this reason, he says, “it is a mistake to think that there is a ‘familiar’ use that will shed light for all

² Available here: [“Gethsemane Epistemology, Pneumatic Evidence, and Divine Agape: Reply to Aaron Preston.”](#)

³ Available here: Preston, [“On the Purported Superiority of Gethsemane Epistemology.”](#)

⁴ Moser, *Gethsemane Epistemology*, p. 13.

inquirers”.⁵ Finally, and most importantly, he makes a similar remark about my use of “superiority.” My main worry about Moser’s vision for Christian philosophy was that it overestimates the epistemic superiority of Gethsemane Epistemology (GE), with its Pneumatic Evidence (PE), over putative alternative sources of theistic evidence and knowledge. But Moser complains that “Preston leaves unclear the sense of “superiority” in his remarks, and therefore it is difficult to evaluate his main complaint”.⁶

In each of these cases Moser seems to assume that intelligibility requires us to attach precise, technical meanings to our terms. However, I’m inclined to think that G.E. Moore had it right when he claimed that terms have perfectly intelligible “ordinary” meanings that ground and constrain their possible precisifications. So even if there are open questions about how I would precisify a term, the fact that it’s a word in our common language entails that it nonetheless bears a meaning accessible to Moser. Take, for instance, the notion of “conclusive evidence.” Whatever more precise meaning we may wish to attach to it, to label evidence “conclusive” is (i) to assign it a very high degree of evidentiary value, one normatively sufficient to settle the question on a disputed or uncertain matter, and (ii) to contrast it with types or cases of evidence that, having lesser evidentiary value, are “inconclusive.” *Evidentiary value* is the value something has precisely *as evidence*. That, in turn, is a function of the power it has to make something *evident* (clear, obvious, etc.). It is in virtue of having a noteworthy allotment of such power, an allotment sufficient to make it rationally obligatory to accept whatever it is evidence of, that evidence is rightly called “conclusive.” I submit that these are facts about the ordinary meaning of the term, clear both from the term’s etymology and its ordinary use as captured in standard dictionary definitions. For instance, if your doctor tells you that you’ve tested positive for tuberculosis and that the results are conclusive, that means the test has settled the question of whether you have tuberculosis. The doctor may be making a factual error about

⁵ Ibid., p. 8. But note that whether they are *more* familiar and *more* readily intelligible does not depend on whether there is a familiar use illuminative for *all* inquirers – their comparative status relative to “self-authenticating” does not depend on their meeting some superlative or maximal standard; they can be *more* *x* (familiar, illuminating, etc.) without being *maximally x*.

⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

whether the results are truly conclusive, but there's no question about what the doctor means to communicate by claiming that they are.

As it happens, Moser himself suggests that PE is “conclusive” without offering any precisification (at least not in the immediate context). Suggesting as *possible* what he clearly takes to be *actual*, he says:

God could provide conclusive evidence for God's reality to humans by a divine self-manifestation... [and] [t]he self-manifestation of God's distinctive character of *agape* ... could supply conclusive evidence in support of ... faith in God.⁷

Unless I've badly misunderstood his overall position, Moser believes that God not only *could* but actually *does* provide conclusive evidence to humans in this way – selectively, of course – in the form of “the *agape* flood.” But the *agape* flood *just is* PE, so this statement can be taken as an affirmation that PE is “conclusive” evidence. And since he offers no precisification of the term here, it is not unreasonable to suppose he's using it in its ordinary sense.

Now, Moser does give a precisifying definition of “conclusive evidence” elsewhere, presenting it as “well-founded undefeated support suitable for (fulfilling the justification condition for) knowledge,” regardless of whether the support is “logically, or deductively, demonstrative.”⁸ So it's also possible that he's using “conclusive” in this sense. However, this definition does not explicitly capture the features of the ordinary meaning outlined above. It does not speak explicitly to the high degree of evidentiary value which makes “conclusive evidence” sufficient to normatively settle a question. Perhaps this missing element is implicit in Moser's concept of *being well-grounded* or of *being undefeated* or of *being suitable for fulfilling the justification condition for knowledge*. I'm inclined to think it is not, since it seems possible for two contrary views to simultaneously meet all three conditions. I take it as uncontroversial that two contrary views could be equally well-grounded and equally suitable for fulfilling the justification condition for knowledge. Whether two such views could be undefeated is perhaps more controversial – perhaps Moser would treat such a

⁷ Moser, “[On Traditional Philosophy and Natural Theology: A Rejoinder](#),” p. 6.

⁸ Paul Moser, *The Elusive God* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009) p.

standoff as mutually-defeating. Barring that, however, I see no reason why they couldn't be undefeated as well, in which case the evidence for each would meet Moser's definition of "conclusive," but neither body of evidence would settle the question. If it allows for this possibility, I would take Moser's definition to be inadequate. But this possible inadequacy is irrelevant for the remainder of my concerns. For even this weakened sense of "conclusive" entails an important contrast between conclusive and inconclusive evidence, and that contrast is all that really matters for my thoughts on GE and "conclusive" evidence henceforth.

The contrast between conclusive and inconclusive evidence is such that to call evidence "conclusive" is to ascribe a certain sort of superiority to it: conclusive evidence has the three properties named in Moser's definition; inconclusive evidence lacks at least one of them. We can characterize this as *evidentiary* superiority – it is superiority precisely as evidence. Evidentiary superiority is one kind of *epistemic* superiority – superiority as a contributor to knowledge. The notion of epistemic superiority is at the heart of my main worry about Moser's vision for Christian Philosophy, which is that it overestimates the epistemic superiority of GE/PE over alternative sources of theistic evidence and knowledge. It is important to remember that my worry concerns GE not merely as an epistemological theory, but *as a definiens for Christian philosophy, and hence as a basis for disciplinary practice and reform*. Many of Moser's responses to my critique miss the significance of this distinction. In fact, I think this is what lies behind his impression that I am guilty of a "recurring straw-man fallacy" consisting in a pattern of "attribut[ing] a requirement to GE that is not actually a requirement of my position."⁹ It is true that these are not requirements of his *epistemological* position, but I contend that they are requirements of his *metaphilosophical* position regarding Christian philosophy, which depends on the judgment that GE is epistemically superior to its alternatives in ways that make it the only correct basis for Christian philosophy.

I will have more to say about this later, but first I must address Moser's initial complaint about my objection, which is that "Preston leaves unclear the sense of "superiority" in his remarks, and therefore it is difficult to evaluate his

⁹ Moser, "Gethsemane Epistemology," p. 10.

main complaint.”¹⁰ I am a puzzled at this, because I explicitly indicated that I was concerned with the purported *epistemic* superiority of GE, its superiority to alternatives *as a source of theistic knowledge*. Furthermore, using natural theology (NT) as an example of such an alternative, I explicitly mentioned several respects in which Moser himself presents it as being epistemically superior. He does this by pointing to some deficiencies of NT which, we are to understand, do not plague GE:

1. The arguments of NT (ANTs) are not cogent (or at least many reasonable people do not find them cogent).¹¹ “They are wobbly, dubious, unreliable, and impotent in ways that the intervening Spirit of God is not.”¹² “Wobbly” is actually a technical term here. It indicates that ANTs fail “to present a resilient basis to suitably critical inquirers.”¹³ Consequently ANTs leave us “wandering in mazes lost.”¹⁴ The general point is that ANTs lack sufficient evidentiary power to make it evident that their conclusions are true (and hence that God exists). By contrast, we are to understand that PE *is* cogent, conclusive, the opposite of wobbly, dubious, unreliable, and impotent, and therefore capable of rescuing us from “wandering mazes lost.” All these terms indicate that PE possesses *superior evidentiary power*, and this (we might think) confers *superior justification* upon our theistic beliefs. This is a form of epistemic superiority.

2. Even if they were cogent, conclusive (etc.), ANTs would not demonstrate the existence of the Christian God of self-sacrificing love for all, but only of some lesser god like an Aristotelian prime mover.¹⁵ By contrast, GE offers PE in the form of “the *agape* flood,” which is an experiential manifestation of the Christian God

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

¹¹ Cf. Moser’s “[Beyond Spectator Evidence to Pneumatic Evidence](#),” p. 2; “[On Traditional Philosophy and Natural Theology](#),” pp. 8-9.

¹² Moser, “[Beyond Spectator Evidence to Pneumatic Evidence](#),” pp. 6-7.

¹³ Paul Moser, “God without Argument,” forthcoming in *Is Faith in God Reasonable?* eds. Corey Miller & Paul Gould (Routledge, 2014).

¹⁴ Moser, “[Gethsemane Epistemology, Pneumatic Evidence, and Divine Agape](#),” p. 2

¹⁵ Cf. Moser’s “[Beyond Spectator Evidence to Pneumatic Evidence](#),” p. 2; “[On Traditional Philosophy and Natural Theology](#),” pp. 8-9.

Himself. Thus, GE is superior in that it alone provides the *right intentional object* for theistic belief and knowledge. PE produces knowledge *of or about* God; ANTs, if they produce knowledge at all, produce knowledge *of or about* something else. This again is a form of epistemic superiority.

3. Insisting on the cogency of ANTs (as is the norm among contemporary Christian philosophers in the philosophy of religion) insults the intelligence of the dissenters mentioned in (1), which is epistemically problematic because (presumably) it tends to provoke emotional resistance to theistic evidence. By contrast, we are to understand that insisting on the evidentiary power (cogency, conclusiveness, etc.) of PE does not. Thus, GE is superior in that it does not insult dissenters and thereby alienate them from theistic evidence.¹⁶

The epistemic superiority of GE consists in its having these knowledge-relevant advantages over NT and (*mutatis mutandis*) other purported sources of theistic knowledge.

Apparently this much was clear enough, since Moser responds to my worries about all three points of purported superiority. I'll examine those responses below. But first note that, at one point in his reply, Moser seems to disavow having claimed superiority in these ways. He says:

My own position on superiority is that Gethsemane epistemology ... is superior in capturing the kind of evidence we should expect of a God worthy of worship.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid. I suspect Moser would characterize this as a psychological, rather than an epistemological, advantage. I agree that it is psychological, but I'm not convinced one can make a clean break between epistemology and psychology, at least not in every instance, and in this instance I don't see why it couldn't be an advantage both epistemic and psychological, and indeed epistemic because psychological. After all, if knowledge involves belief, as it does on "the standard account," and belief is a psychological state, then knowledge involves psychological states. But however we may characterize it, there is no question that it is an advantage Moser attributes to GE, and one relevant to acquiring theistic knowledge.

¹⁷ Moser, "Gethsemane Epistemology," p. 7.

This sounds as if Moser is presenting GE not as a *superior source* of theistic evidence/knowledge, but merely as a *superior model* of how we should expect to acquire theistic evidence/knowledge, given a certain conception of God. It sounds as if GE's superiority consists entirely in its conceptual fit or coherence with the notion of a worship-worthy God, rather than in its ability to produce actual cases of theistic knowledge. If that's right, then I was wrong to look for GE's superiority as an *applied epistemology*, since Moser intended it to be superior only as a *theoretical epistemological model*. However, this restricted superiority claim (as I shall call it) is problematic not only for several reasons, but for reasons of several types. At present, I will focus less on the content of the claim (which is problematic because contestable) and more on the fact that it is a *restricted* superiority claim.

The idea that GE is superior merely as a theoretical model is problematic for two reasons. First, it is problematic because Moser presents GE as the basis for a distinctively Christian philosophy operating in "obedience mode," as opposed to the "discussion mode" of mainline academic philosophy, and "obedience mode" seems to involve more than accepting GE as a theoretical model. It seems to involve (i) *inhabiting* GE as an experiential reality, with the result that we are taken beyond inconclusive, propositional, "spectator evidence" to conclusive, non-propositional, PE, and then (ii) conducting one's philosophical work on that basis. To accept GE merely as a theoretical model is *not* to transcend the domain of propositions and spectator evidence. It is to accept a theory about *how* to transcend it, but obviously that's not the same as actually transcending it. To do that, one must come into existential contact with the things the model models; one must pass through the propositional representations "to the things themselves" (to borrow a phrase from the early realist- Phenomenologists).

Second, the restricted superiority claim is problematic because it does not square with many of the claims Moser makes for GE/PE in other places. For instance:

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.¹⁸

And:

I find crucial value in evidence from religious experience of a distinctive kind [presumably the kind operative in GE], but the rest of natural theology is seriously deficient in making a contribution to Christian philosophy.¹⁹

Here it is not the conceptual coherence of GE with a certain concept of God that Moser extols, nor NT's lack of conceptual fit that he criticizes. Rather, it is *the quality of the evidence itself*: Moser finds "crucial value in *evidence from*" the experience of the *agape* flood. He explicates this crucial evidentiary value by contrasting PE with ANTs, which he judges to be deficient *as evidence* because he finds them wobbly, dubious, unreliable, and impotent. By contrast, PE is none of these, and presumably not because it merely *lacks* these properties, but because it *possesses* opposing properties (e.g., stability, indubitability, reliability, power). Thus, GE and NT are here evaluated not merely as competing *models* of how theistic evidence might be acquired, but as competing *sources* of theistic knowledge in virtue of the different types of experientially-available theistic evidence they provide.

With our focus clearly upon GE as a purportedly superior *source* of knowledge, let's turn to Moser's responses to my worries about the three points of purported epistemic superiority given above: (1) that GE that it gives us better justification than NT for theistic knowledge, (2) that GE alone gives us the correct object of theistic knowledge (namely, God), and (3) that it is less insulting to dissenters.

My worry about (3) was that, while insisting that GE is conclusive may not insult dissenters' intelligence, it insults their character, so that GE and NT are on par regarding insultingsness. In response, Moser says:

¹⁸ Moser, "[Beyond Spectator Evidence to Pneumatic Evidence](#)," pp. 6-7.

¹⁹ Moser, "[On Traditional Theology and Natural Theology](#)," p. 4

...we should expect the Good News from a God of perfect love to be honest enough to be redemptively offensive. A relevant challenge: try to read the New Testament without being offended regarding moral character. The objection at hand, then, is misplaced.²⁰

I agree that we should expect God to be redemptively offensive under certain conditions, but that does not mean the objection was misplaced. I objected not to the fact that GE is insulting, but to the claim that GE is less insulting than NT, and hence superior to NT with regard to insultingness. It's not – they're equally insulting. And that's fine. But let's not pretend that there's an advantage for GE here. The fact that we should expect God to be redemptively offensive under certain conditions does nothing to diminish the insult. Nor is there any reason to think that redemptive insult from a perfectly loving God would be to character alone – as if GE's insult might be “the right kind of insult” and NT's “the wrong kind.” The Biblical picture of fallen humanity as possessed of a set of disordered loves *and* a darkened mind insults both character *and* intellect. So I fail to see how insulting dissenters' intellects by insisting on the cogency of ANTs makes NT any worse-off than GE: they are equally insulting in ways that are equally Biblical. And for that reason I doubt that GE is superior to NT by being less insulting.

My worry about (1) was that, while Moser presents PE as epistemically superior to ANTs in virtue of its evidentiary power (being cogent, the opposite of wobbly, dubious, unreliable, and impotent, rescuing us from “wandering mazes lost,” and so on), the religious experience of many suggests otherwise. My impression is that many reasonable people, many suitably critical inquirers, do not find their own religious experiences to have the evidentiary virtues, and the consequent epistemic superiority to ANTs, that Moser claims for PE. In my view this voids the purported superiority of GE to NT for any practical application, including use as a disciplinary orienting-point for Christian philosophers. Moser makes several points in response.

First, uncertain about what I meant by “superiority,” Moser observes that “He [Preston] seems to use a sense of “superiority” that involves the removal of ambiguity in divine evidence for a very wide range of people, if not

²⁰ Moser, “Gethsemane Epistemology,” p. 11.

for all people.”²¹ To the extent that *being unambiguous* is an evidentiary virtue belonging to the same family as (and arguably a necessary condition of) being cogent, conclusive, the opposite of wobbly, dubious, unreliable, and impotent, and capable of rescuing us from “wandering mazes lost,” Moser has the right idea. He responds by claiming that it is “a serious mistake to demand “superiority” in this sense given the avowed elusiveness of the God and Father of Jesus Christ.”²² This is a surprising response given that Moser himself faults ANTs for lacking the characteristics that supposedly constitute “superiority in this sense.” If we should not expect theistic evidence that is unambiguous, cogent, etc., for a wide range of people, then why fault ANTs for failing to provide such evidence? Consistency requires that the demand for cogency, etc., apply to both or to neither alike. Either way I don’t see how GE comes out superior to NT on this score, for either the demand applies to both and (arguably) they both fail to meet it, in which case they are equally matched, or it applies to neither and it is a non-issue in evaluating their respective merits.

Second, Moser argues that GE’s failure in practice is irrelevant because of the theoretical nature of epistemology:

This kind of move to “practice” is a mistake. We cannot dismiss an analysis of knowledge just on the ground that we fail to meet the standards of the analysis. Otherwise, we would be involved in a question-begging strategy against all analyses of knowledge that accommodate skepticism. In addition, an epistemology is not a practical recipe for identifying which actual people have knowledge and which do not. Such a recipe would take one deep into empirical matters beyond epistemology proper.²³

This would be uncontroversial if epistemology was merely of theoretical interest, a purely academic battle of theory vs. theory. However, while I agree that epistemology is first and foremost a theoretical discipline, I am not convinced that there are clear boundaries between “epistemology proper” and the various practical domains to which it is relevant, such as science and law, or

²¹ Ibid., p. 7.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p. 8.

even religion. To the extent that these fields involve deciding among competing perspectives on the basis of evidence, they can be – and often are, by philosophers – characterized as *applied epistemology*. And while we usually think of the relationship between epistemology and these applied domains as mediated by a relevant “philosophy of...,” I’m inclined to think that these divisions are more conventional than natural. Consequently, it’s not clear to me that failure in practice is ever strictly *irrelevant* to the assessment of an epistemological theory.

Of course I agree that “we cannot dismiss an analysis of knowledge just on the ground that we fail to meet the standards of the analysis.”²⁴ But this applies only to the normative aspect of epistemology – the fact that we fail to meet well-founded epistemic norms doesn’t count against the theory any more than our failure to live up to well-founded moral norms counts as evidence against a moral theory. However, there is also a descriptive aspect to some epistemological (and ethical) theories, and I don’t see why an epistemological theory that makes descriptive claims about, or at least has clear descriptive implications for, the experiential aspects of knowledge-acquisition cannot be empirically challenged. I take Moser’s presentation of GE to include such claims. For instance:

“... God wants to engage the human will, in order to encourage willing human compliance with God’s perfect will. In doing so, God provides compelling reasonable assurance to receptive humans regarding God’s reality and goodness (cf. 1 Thess. 1:5), and thereby saves them from cognitive despair.”²⁵

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Moser, “[Doing and Teaching Christian Philosophy: Reply to McFall](#),” p. 12. Incidentally, this is the passage I had in mind when I said that William Rowe and John Rawls lost their faith “in part from the sort of cognitive disappointment against which pneumatic evidence is supposed to be proof” (Preston, “[On the Purported Superiority of Gethsemane Epistemology](#),” p. 7). Taking this to mean “argumentative proof,” Moser complains that “It is a category mistake to characterize the *agapeic* evidence of Romans 5:5 (which is central to Gethsemane epistemology) as a “proof.” ... Preston is no longer talking about Gethsemane epistemology here, and I cannot tell whose theory he has in mind. In any case, it is not my account.” (Moser, “Gethsemane Epistemology,” p. 9). But in fact I meant “proof” in the sense of “impervious,” as in “fire-proof”. Hence my claim was that GE is supposed to be impervious to cognitive disappointment, or disappointment-proof, which is essentially what Moser is saying in the passage linked to this note. It was bad judgment on my part to use an

If this claim is true, then it should be possible for receptive people to verify it from their own experience. And if they can't, then either they're not *really* receptive, or the claim is false – though it can be easily salvaged, and this dilemma avoided, by adding a *ceteris paribus* clause (as Moser in effect does by allowing that many things other than uncooperativeness can interfere with PE²⁶).

But in a sense this debate about “epistemology proper” is beside the point, for the fact that Moser presents GE as a basis for disciplinary practice and reform means that *he* has thrust it into a role that lies beyond the bounds of epistemology proper as *he* conceives them. Here it is important to remember that my main concern is not to criticize GE as an epistemological theory, but as the *definiens* of Christian philosophy and hence as the uniquely correct basis for disciplinary practice among Christian philosophers. Because academic disciplines are social institutions, disciplinary practice requires broad agreement among practitioners concerning how work in the discipline should be conducted. If GE does not prove its worth as an applied epistemology among Christian philosophers, if it frequently suffers “failure in practice” among this population, this will certainly be relevant to their individual and corporate deliberations about whether to approach their philosophical work in the way Moser suggests they should. Indeed, it is unreasonable to expect Christian philosophers to accept Moser’s vision for Christian philosophy unless they can verify GE’s epistemic superiority for themselves.

It is worth emphasizing that these same considerations apply to GE even on the restricted superiority claim. Moser seems to think otherwise. He says:

My own position on superiority is that Gethsemane epistemology ... is superior in capturing the kind of evidence we should expect of a God worthy of worship. This position, contrary to Preston, does not demand that I engage in the sociology of knowledge of God. It is a separate, and

ambiguous term in a rather archaic formulation, but this had nothing to do with misunderstanding GE in the way Moser supposes.

²⁶ Moser, “Gethsemane Epistemology,” pp. 10-11.

not directly relevant, matter whether certain actual people find ambiguity in their evidence for God.²⁷

To the contrary, to propose GE as a basis for disciplinary practice is to void any such exemption. Even as a mere theoretical model, to propose it as a basis for disciplinary practice is to propose that Christian philosophers should embrace it as a *preferred* model and orient their work around it. It is to propose a sort of doctrinal constraint on their work, just as if someone were to insist that one model of the Trinity was clearly “the Biblical” one and then use coherence with that model as a litmus test for counting philosophical work as “Christian” philosophy. But, again, it’s unreasonable to expect Christian philosophers to accept GE (or a model of the Trinity, or anything else) as a preferred model unless they can verify its superiority *as a model* for themselves. So, moving to the restricted superiority claim does not exempt Moser from the sociology of knowledge so long as he continues to present GE as definitive of Christian philosophy.

What’s more, it is highly unlikely that a favorable consensus will emerge around GE (as the *Christ- Shaped Philosophy Project* itself suggests) for several reasons, only one of which may be its failure in practice. Another reason is that the GE model presupposes a number of controversial theological claims. I noted previously that Moser offers

a vision for Christian philosophy grounded in a particular account of religious epistemology ... itself grounded in a particular understanding of Christian theology... (call this “Moserian theology”).²⁸

Moserian theology takes controversial positions on a number of topics, including atonement, grace, free will, and, above all, the “worship-worthiness” of God – the very thing that GE is supposed to cohere with better than other models of theistic knowledge. In fact, “worship-worthiness” seems to be Moser’s foundational concept, his central commitment; all other aspects of Moserian theology are tailored to fit with *it*, as is GE itself. As I said previously, my own theological views are very similar to Moser’s. I have no objection to

²⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁸ Preston, “On the Purported Superiority,” p. 1.

Moserian theology as such. However, I do have an objection to using Moserian theology to define Christian philosophy. I would have the same objection to defining Christian philosophy in terms of Orthodox or Catholic or Reformed or Lutheran theology. None of these is an appropriate *definiens* for Christian philosophy any more than it is an appropriate *definiens* for Christianity itself. To assert that one is uniquely definitive of the domain of *Christian* things (religion, philosophy, scholarship, music, marriage, commerce, etc.) is to beg the question against all the others.

Moser's restricted superiority claim begs the question in just this way. Again, it says that GE "is superior in capturing the kind of evidence we should expect of a God worthy of worship." But, as I pointed-out in my previous paper, worship-worthiness is a good candidate for an essentially-contested concept among Christians (and other theists).²⁹ Many Christians, (including some Christian philosophers) have understood worship-worthiness very differently from Moser, along nominalist/voluntarist (hereafter, simply *voluntarist*) lines for instance. But Moser seems to think their dissent is unimportant:

... if the alternative position in question [i.e., voluntarism] is "both absurd and pernicious," as Preston claims, let us move on. ... when a position is "both absurd and pernicious," we need not tarry long with it. Instead, we may light a candle and move ahead with a position that is not absurd or pernicious. ... A being worthy of the title "God" must have a morally perfect character that duly guides the divine will accordingly.³⁰

But this simply begs the question against the voluntarist – and if we should worry about begging the question against skeptics (as the above quotation from p. 8 of Moser's reply indicates), why *shouldn't* we worry about doing so against voluntarists? The position is absurd and pernicious *by my lights*, but the voluntarist sees things differently. He will say that God is not bound by

²⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

³⁰ Moser, "Gethsemane Epistemology," p. 15.

reason, so absurdity is not a problem.³¹ And he will say that, since good and evil are determined by God's unconstrained will, there is no independent standard of moral perfection for God to embody in a will-guiding character, nor an independent standard of perniciousness by which to judge the view. We are thus faced with the question *whose lights should we trust: our own, or the voluntarists?* Assuming that the best essentialists and the best voluntarists (from the whole of Christian history) are epistemic peers, this is a tough question to answer in a non-question-begging way.

In *The Elusive God*, Moser argues that “our semantic, concept-forming intentions that give meaning to our terms” constitute “a firm place to stand in answering skeptical questions about evidence and reasonable belief.”³² There ensues a discussion of what “we” mean by “truth indicator” and “epistemic reason” which eventually leads to the claim that

Skeptics cannot plausibly charge us with question-begging (or circular-reasoning) here. It is *part of what we mean* by “epistemic reason” that [such and such phenomena count as truth indicators and epistemic reasons]³³

Could this same strategy work to defend Moser's concept of God, and subsidiary concepts like “worship-worthiness” and “moral perfection” and so on, against the charge of begging the question against the voluntarist? Could Moser argue that “voluntarists cannot plausibly charge us with question-begging here, since it is *part of what we mean* by “God” that God must have a morally perfect character that duly guides the divine will accordingly (etc.)”?

To my mind, it depends on who the “we” are. If Moser means to include only himself and people who agree with him (i.e., essentialists), fine. In that case he's not begging the question against the voluntarists, but he's also not disagreeing with them, since he's only explaining what “we essentialists”

³¹ Thus Calvin, commenting on his doctrine of double predestination, says: “I confess that this decree ought to appall us. At least that is how it is when we think of it according to human reason” (quoted in Francois Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, tr. Philip Mairet, New York, Harper and Row, 1963, p. 281). The point, of course, is that God is not bound by reason at all.

³² Moser, *The Elusive God*, p. 188.

³³ *Ibid.*, 190.

mean by the terms we use. Presumably voluntarists would agree that that's how essentialists use those terms. But if the "we" is supposed to include voluntarists, then this strategy *does* beg the question. That's because voluntarists have their own, rather different concept-forming intentions that inform what they mean by "God." To include voluntarists in Moser's "we" is to assume that the essentialists' concept-forming/meaning-conferring intentions are authoritative for voluntarists. On this view, the voluntarists are merely making a semantic error: they are failing to grasp the meanings of terms like "God" and "worship-worthy," etc. Moser actually implies that this is the case when, in discussing his version of inclusivism, he claims that

Many exclusivists of a Calvinist or Reformed persuasion will reply that God is "sovereign" and therefore has a right to exclude whomever he wishes. That reply, however, neglects divine worthiness of worship as central to God's character. Specifically, God's will is not morally permitted to violate the moral perfection inherent to worthiness of worship.³⁴

To the contrary, most of the folks I know who are of this Calvinist-exclusivist persuasion do not "neglect" the concept of worthiness of worship; rather, they are thoroughly preoccupied with a *different* concept of worship-worthiness, one which sees unconstrained freedom and power (which they usually label "sovereignty" or "omnipotence") as more central to worship-worthiness than any substantive concept of moral perfection. Moser's assertion that they "neglect" worship-worthiness *does* beg the question against them, for it assumes that that if they just paid better attention to the concept/meaning, they'd see that "worship-worthiness" entails Moser's inclusivism. But that would be the case only if the concept they'd be paying attention to is Moser's essentialist concept, informed by *his* meaning-conferring intentions.

Like the criticism of the Calvinist-exclusivist, the idea that GE is the uniquely correct basis for Christian philosophy because it is superior "in capturing the kind of evidence we should expect from a worship-worthy God," assumes that the essentialist concept of worship-worthiness has some claim on Christian philosophers who are voluntarists. But this begs the question against

³⁴ Ibid., 246.

their view of “worship-worthiness. Consequently, assuming that the best thinkers from each party are epistemic peers, it is far from clear that we essentialists are justified in promoting GE as a *definiens* of Christian philosophy. To assume otherwise is to ignore the epistemic significance of peer-disagreement in disciplines like theology and philosophy.

A similar dynamic is apparent in Moser’s response to my suggestion that the superior theistic evidence enjoyed by St. Paul might have been given on account of his unique Apostolic mission, rather than being generally available on the basis of cooperativeness. Moser says: “This kind of objection may seem initially plausible – until one actually reads Paul’s writings...”³⁵ But surely Moser is well aware that people equally steeped in Paul’s writings come away with radically different understandings of them. Indeed, a number of theological positions that Moser rejects, like the penal substitution theory of the atonement, and the Calvinist view of sovereignty just discussed, are usually thought of as thoroughly Pauline. As Peter knew (2 Peter 3:16), “actually reading Paul’s writings” is hardly a royal road to theological clarity. There is much worth saying on how one might “actually read” all the passages that Moser points to³⁶ and still endorse my suggestion. But I will limit myself to the general point that, in assuming the matter can be settled just by reading biblical texts, Moser is assuming that others will, or at least ought to, read them as he does, in a way that is consistent with his essentialism. While debate about how we ought to read Scripture – an activity abounding in propositional reasoning – is a legitimate activity and one central to the Christian tradition, to merely assume or assert that one’s reading is the uniquely correct one and then use it as a basis to draw disciplinary lines begs the question against alternative readings endorsed by epistemic peers.

Returning to my worry about (1), Moser’s third response seems to be that we don’t have adequate evidence to judge whether GE is in fact subject to widespread failure in practice. I had argued:

1. Some people meet Moser’s criterion for being granted PE (viz., cooperativeness with God) but are left “wandering mazes lost” in

³⁵ Moser, “Gethsemane Epistemology,” p. 11.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

- significant ways, without the sort of assurance that cogent, conclusive, theistic (or specifically-Christian) evidence would provide.³⁷
2. Thus, either (a) such figures lack PE, or (b) PE lacks the evidentiary virtues Moser ascribes to it.
 3. If (a), then God's criterion for bestowing PE must be something other than cooperativeness, and the most plausible alternative makes PE so selectively available that it would not be an adequate basis for disciplinary practice among Christian philosophers.
 4. If (b), then PE is not superior to NT in the way specified in (1), hence (1) provides no compelling reason to prefer it to NT either as an applied epistemology or as a basis for disciplinary practice among Christian philosophers.

In support of premise 1, I appealed to examples including William Rowe, John Rawls, Gandhi, and Mother Teresa.³⁸ But Moser objects that

³⁷ Moser pointed out that his view allows for multiple reasons other than uncooperativeness that a person might lack PE. While I am grateful for that clarification, the point still remains that if PE is not regularly and reliably available to Christian philosophers, its epistemic superiority will not be sufficiently apparent in that population to make it a suitable basis for disciplinary practice. I discuss this at length further on.

³⁸ Moser's commentary on Mother Teresa is not directly relevant to my worry about (1), but it still merits a brief response. He suggests that her "dark night of the soul," was due not to uncooperativeness with regard to the love commands, but to her misguided prayers to experience what Jesus experienced on the cross. "The best advice for her," he says, "may have been: beware of what you pray for, you may get it." (Moser, *Gethsemane Epistemology*, p. 10) I have a hard time seeing how this treatment of one of His most faithful servants is consistent with the character of a worship-worthy God. What kind of loving Father would give His obedient child poison, or torture, just because she asked for it? I find something closer to the traditional understanding of the dark night more consistent with worship-worthiness, and more convincing overall. On the traditional view, the dark night serves a redemptive purpose of purification. By removing the sweetness of interior fellowship with God and the assurance of future reunion, the dark night removes a certain range of possible ulterior motives for faithfulness and thereby gives us occasion to practice (as I, not the tradition, would put it) doing good for its own sake. A worship-worthy God might well allow us to suffer in this way for this purpose, which we may characterize as a "redemptive" or a "soul-making" purpose. This possibility is what I had in mind when I suggested that "if the Gethsemane experience is supposed to be normative for Christians, perhaps the experience of being forsaken by God is too... (Ibid., p. 14). Moser's response to this proposal ignores the qualification given in the second half of this sentence: "... in both cases, we hope, scaled down to bearable, merely human proportions" (Ibid.).

I (at least) would not claim to know why Rowe and Rawls lost their faith, if they ever had faith in God. ... A big problem is that we (or at least I) do not have an adequate characterization of the actual “cognitive disappointment” allegedly experienced by Rowe and Rawls. In particular, I have no idea of what kind of evidence they expected from God, or even if they had a coherent expectation on this front.³⁹

And concerning Gandhi:

Once again Preston goes beyond the evidence we actually have. We have no firm evidence for supposing that Gandhi was “considerably more cooperative with God vis-a-vis the love commands than most Christians.” Preston seems to think that he has sociological evidence indicating how cooperative “most Christians” are regarding the love commands, but this is doubtful at best. In addition, we have no evidence to support Preston’s suggestion that Gandhi “did not receive from God evidence sufficient to motivate a conversion to Christianity.” For all we know, he did receive salient undefeated evidence but opted not to yield to the risen Christ.⁴⁰

I have some sympathy for these objections insofar as evidence for the points in question is indeed limited in quantity and quality; however, in the final analysis the objections strike me as unduly skeptical. Obviously we have no direct evidence about other people’s spiritual lives, but we do have testimonial evidence about the religious lives of the figures I mentioned, including Rowe⁴¹ and Rawls.⁴² On this basis, it seems to me, we can have justified beliefs to the effect that the problem of evil (experienced “in the flesh” in WWII) had much to do with Rawls’ loss of faith, and that Rowe’s had to do with the conspicuous lack of “compelling reasonable assurance” of God’s existence. In both cases it seems reasonable to suppose that conclusive evidence of God’s existence

³⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ See, for instance, Rowe’s interview with Nick Trakakis in [Philosophy Now](#) magazine.

⁴² John Rawls, “On My Religion,” in *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin & Faith*, Thomas Nagel (ed.), Harvard University Press, 2009.

would have prevented loss of faith (or at least, in Rawls' case, to have shaped it differently, perhaps making for a conversion to misotheism rather than to atheism or agnosticism). Rowe's case is particularly interesting vis-à-vis the idea of GE. He says:

My religious convictions [as a young adult] were based largely on my conversion experience and my simple acceptance of the Bible (in its original manuscripts, of course) as the revealed word of God. What led to the erosion of these convictions was not any specific argument, philosophical or scientific, that tended to show the convictions to be false. Rather, it was the lack of experiences and evidence sufficient to sustain my religious life and my religious convictions. I knew that it was wrong and arrogant to ask for some special sign from God. But I longed for a sense of God's presence in my life. And although I spent hours in prayer and thirsted after some dim assurance that God was present, I never had any such experience. I tried to be a better person and to follow whatever I could glean from the Bible as a life of service to God. But in the end I had no more sense of the presence of God than I had before my conversion experience. So, it was the absence of religious experiences of the appropriate kind that, as I would now put it, left me free to seriously explore the grounds for disbelief.⁴³

Is this not an adequate characterization of Rowe's "actual cognitive disappointment"? I agree that one might reasonably ask for a more detailed description of what Rowe was expecting by way of a "sense of the presence of God" or a religious experience "of the appropriate kind." At the same time, it is not as if Rowe's descriptions are so thin that we have "no idea of what kind of evidence [he] expected from God." We know that he was looking not for a "special sign" but for a more moderate "sense of the presence of God." This is just the sort of thing that the *agape* flood, as conclusive *de re* evidence of God, would surely provide. What's more, he sought this experiential evidence more or less in the place Moser recommends: in prayer.⁴⁴ It is therefore a mistake to

⁴³ Interview with Nick Trakakis in [Philosophy Now](#) magazine.

⁴⁴ Whether his prayer was *filial* perhaps remains unclear, so perhaps Moser can argue that Rowe wasn't praying the right way. But at a certain point, as with Moser's ideas about

dismiss the case outright, as if we just can't tell whether it's even relevant to GE. It's relevant enough to take it seriously as a possible counterexample to the claims of GE.

Something similar can be said of the Gandhi case. If we agree that we can know a tree by its fruit (Matt. 7:16-20), and if we recognize *agape* in the fruit of Gandhi's life,⁴⁵ and if God is the unique source of *agape*-empowerment, then we have good reason to believe that Gandhi was cooperating with God in the *de-re-but-not-de-dicto* way specified in Moser's account of inclusivism (more on which below). Thus we also have good reason to reject the idea that "he did receive salient undefeated evidence but opted not to yield to the risen Christ," since he *was* yielding to Christ in giving himself to *agape*.

As to my impression that Gandhi was *more cooperative* with God than *most Christians*, I again appeal to the knowledge-by-fruit principle. Most Christians do not produce the kind of fruit Gandhi did: they do not commit to living communally with social outcasts ("untouchables") and devote their lives to the welfare of the downtrodden so completely that they become leaders of social justice movements and world-wide symbols of transcendent goodness. To the extent that Mother Teresa or Dorothy Day stand-out from "ordinary" Christians as exemplars of Christ-like *agape*, so does Gandhi. It seems reasonable to count this as a sign of being *more cooperative with God than most*.

The knowledge-by-fruit principle addresses Moser's worry insofar as it is about the hiddenness of each person's relationship to God. But he also seems worried about the inductive basis for my "most" claim. I don't know what Moser's standards are for making such a claim, but in my view one doesn't need volumes of statistical data to make a well-founded judgment about what's normal for a class with which one is familiar. Moser himself makes a number of "most" claims about Christian philosophy that presumably he takes to be well-founded even without such data, e.g.:

...diversion [from Christ as the power and wisdom of God] occurs when a philosophy, even a philosophy called "Christian," ignores the

Mother Teresa (see note 38), one has to wonder whether God's being a stickler about such things is consistent with His being worship-worthy.

⁴⁵ *Gandhi, an Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993).

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. 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, the philosophy misses the mark as a Christian philosophy. *Most philosophy* fails this redemptive litmus test, because redemption, as being saved by God, is ignored by *most philosophers*, who thus fail to honor the unique redemptive Mediator from God, the inward Christ.⁴⁶

Of course, an obvious difference between the class of philosophers/philosophy and the class of Christians is that the latter is a much larger class. Even so, familiarity with a representative sample should be sufficient to ground a reasonable generalization. If Moser remains unhappy with the "most" claim, I am happy to reduce it to a "many" claim, which should be easier to justify on the basis of "the evidence we actually have." Either way, I don't think I'm going "beyond the evidence we actually have" in any deeply problematic sense. I see these claims as reasonable interpretations of, and/or inferences *from*, the evidence we actually have, inferences which go "beyond the evidence" only insofar as inductive generalization must always do so. But I admit the evidence and the inference could be improved by borrowing a page from the experimental philosophers' playbook and surveying as many Christian philosophers as we can get hold of to see if the *agape* flood has turned up in their experience with the epistemic virtues Moser attributes to it. That may be a project worth pursuing.

One final consideration pertaining to my worry about (1) comes from Moser's view that lack of cooperation with God is but one of many reasons why a person might lack PE.⁴⁷ As noted earlier, this amounts to adding a *ceteris paribus* clause to the principle that "God provides compelling reasonable assurance to receptive humans regarding God's reality and goodness."⁴⁸ But once we add this, it is reasonable to ask just how frequently *ceteris* are actually

⁴⁶ Moser, "[Christ Shaped Philosophy](#)," p. 8.

⁴⁷ Moser, *Gethsemane Epistemology*, pp. 10-11.

⁴⁸ Moser, "[Doing and Teaching Christian Philosophy: Reply to McFall](#)," p. 12.

paribus. If it turns out that other things are not *normally* equal, that the *ceteris paribus* clause is necessary to excuse not the occasional exception to the rule, but to cover the normal case, one has to wonder whether the rule is correct. And even if it is, one has to wonder what the practical value of emphasizing it might be in a disciplinary context. It might be interesting to know what God would do under certain ideal conditions, and it might be good to be reminded of the fact if we are in danger of forgetting it; but if those ideal conditions are rarely satisfied, it doesn't make much sense to orient an academic discipline around what happens when they are.

Now, I can imagine a couple of scenarios in which this might make sense. In ethics, for instance, it would make sense to pay attention to infrequently-realized ideals for the purpose of making true moral judgments – it's worth knowing that we're falling short of an ideal even if we can't do anything to change that, just so we have an accurate moral-assessment of ourselves. It would also make sense if paying attention to the ideal is likely to increase the frequency with which it is realized. But in neither case should ethics be focused solely on the ideal. It should pay equal attention to the real conditions under which we live, and it should have something to say about the possibility or impossibility of bridging the gap between the real and the ideal. The same is true in epistemology, and the rest of philosophy. Why should Christian philosophers make GE the focal point of their work if the bestowal of PE is irregular and can't be counted on in real life? Perhaps it is part of our task to point out the comparative deficiency other forms of theistic knowledge. Even friends of NT can admit that PE, were we to actually have it, would be better theistic evidence than an ANT. That's worth keeping in mind simply because it's true, and also because it should keep us mindful of the limits of the evidence we actually have, and therefore duly humble about what NT can accomplish. But it's not clear that keeping the possibility of PE in mind has much more utility than this. While keeping a moral ideal in mind gives us something to aim for, GE gives us only something to hope for. That's because it's not clear what we humans could do to facilitate the realization of the relevant *ideal conditions*. We can show ourselves willing or cooperative by orienting our lives around the love commands, and we can seek God in prayer, but as Rawls', Rowe's, Gandhi's, and Mother Teresa's cases suggest, that is no guarantee that we will receive PE.

Indeed, as Moser emphasizes⁴⁹, God decides what counts as “the right time” to bestow PE upon a willing person. But what is a willing person to do in the meantime? Once we’ve acknowledged the “in principle” superiority of PE, if PE is not currently available to us it makes sense to occupy ourselves with other possible sources of theistic evidence (like NT), even while we continue to hope for PE. And insofar as academic disciplines exist in part to meet human needs via human efforts, it makes good sense that a Christian philosophy would pay at least as much attention to what we humans can do under our normal, non-ideal conditions, as to the ideal itself. And if doing NT is the best we can do to get theistic evidence under our normal, non-ideal conditions, then a Christian philosophy should pay serious attention to NT, even while it remembers the possibility of GE.

By contrast, Moser’s vision for a GE-oriented Christian philosophy combined with his strong opposition to NT looks to me to be analogous to the following preposterous scenario (which is, sadly, actualized in the lives of some religious people). Imagine someone arguing that the New Testament model for medicine is that of miraculous healing via the channeling of Divine power through cooperative humans. People ask Jesus to heal them or their loved ones, and Jesus does. Peter, empowered by God, heals a beggar (Acts 3: 6-16), and raises Tabitha from the dead (Acts 9: 36-42). Paul, empowered by God, does the same for Eutychus (Acts 20:9-12). Jesus tells the disciples that “whoever believes” will do miracles similar to, and even greater than, his own (John 14:12) – clearly a claim (our imagined person argues) that applies to all Christians at all times, and not just to those in the first-century. Thus, a truly Christian approach to medicine will focus primarily, and perhaps exclusively, on the possibility of miraculous healing. It will emphasize the need for medical doctors to be cooperative and communicative with God, so that God will use them as conduits of Divine healing power when they treat their patients. It might even encourage them to be ready to employ unconventional techniques and treatments, like laying on corpses (Acts 20:9-12), sticking fingers in patients’ ears and touching their tongues (Mark 7:33), or using spit and dirt (Mark 7:33, John 9:6) rather than conventional pharmaceuticals. Any glance in the direction of conventional medicine will be frowned upon on the ground that it is not “Christian medicine.”

⁴⁹ Moser, “Gethsemane Epistemology,” p. 5.

Clearly, there is something wrong with this proposal for “Christian medicine.” And what’s wrong is that two-thousand years of Christian experience has shown that God doesn’t work this way, no matter what the Bible *seems* to say about it. Sometimes he heals miraculously, sometimes he doesn’t, and it is not clear why He makes the choices He does. So should a Christian, even a Christian doctor, pray for people’s healing? Of course. But should that be the primary focus for a Christian doctor, or for a discipline of “Christian medicine”? Of course not. The Christian doctor should, out of neighbor-love, focus on the dependable regularities, discovered by modern medical science, that God has built into the world. If God decides to do something wonderfully irregular, great! But if not, we should persist in doing what we can to love our neighbors within the set of regularities that define the natural order. Our attitude should be like that of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Daniel 3), with one important modification. We should say: “if we are thrown into the fire, God is able to deliver us; if He does not deliver us, we will not lose faith, but we also won’t just sit by passively and burn—we will do our best to put the fire out with whatever other means are at our disposal!” If the fire is disease, the relevant “other means” are those of modern medicine. If the fire is the multifarious sources of religious doubt, the “other means” include a panoply of philosophical projects, including NT, theodicy, and so on. If PE is not readily available to many people for reasons that are beyond their control, I see no reason why a Christian philosophy could not or should not make these “other means” the main focus of its work.

Moving on, my objection to (2) was that, insofar as PE does not reveal God *qua* God, but, e.g., God *qua* *agape*, it exhibits the same sort of content-gap that obtains between the conclusions of ANTs and the Christian God. The only difference is that ANTs deal in propositional content and PE deals in non-propositional content. I’m thinking of “content” here as the constitutive features of conscious states that give those states the intentional bearings that they have, that make them *of x* or *of y*, thereby determining their intentional-objects. So if there’s a content-gap of any sort, then it is contestable whether GE is epistemically superior to NT in virtue of presenting the right object of knowledge. (Perhaps one could argue that GE’s gap is “smaller,” but so far Moser seems to have put the contrast in absolute terms: GE presents *God*, NT does not, period.) I also argued that, in order to close the content-gap, GE

must rely on forms of evidence and reasoning that fall under Moser's concepts of "spectator evidence" and "discussion mode philosophy." Specifically, to the extent that the content of the *agape* flood consists merely in the welling-up in consciousness of strong love-oriented feelings, thoughts, attitudes, etc., it will not be evident that one is experiencing a self-manifestation of God. To close the gap between the contents of the experience and the conscious state that is *the knowledge of God qua God*, one would have to employ some interpretive framework, such as Christianity's propositional revelation about God. Interpreting the experience in light of the propositional claims of the New Testament, claims to the effect that God is *agape* and reveals Himself in the *agape* flood, we can come to recognize the experience as a manifestation of God, and hence as theistic evidence.⁵⁰ But propositions about God, even Scriptural ones, are "spectator evidence," and the activities of "interpreting" and "coming to recognize" will inevitably involve some reasoning of the sort characteristic of "discussion mode" philosophy. The upshot, I argued, is that, to the extent that *the flood* does not include explicitly theistic content, PE does not count as a genuine alternative, let alone an epistemically superior alternative, to "spectator evidence," since it must be combined with the latter in order to "bridge the gap."

In response, Moser wonders whether I am conflating "(a) the conditions for *proposing* or *defending* undefeated evidence for a belief with (b) the conditions for *having* undefeated evidence for a belief":

This is a serious conflation, because a person can have undefeated evidence for belief in God's reality without proposing or defending such evidence. A child innocent of philosophy, for instance, can have undefeated evidence for belief in God's reality. We make the having of evidence too intellectual or cognitive if we require that it include one's proposing or defending such evidence. Preston, I submit, conflates what should not be conflated here. This is a kind of "level-confusion" that emerges often in reflections on epistemology.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Cf. Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today* (San Francisco, HarperOne, 2009), ch. 6.

⁵¹ Moser, "Gethsemane Epistemology," p. 13.

Alternatively, Moser suspects that I may be tacitly imposing a “limitation on God’s self-manifesting power”:

Barring the aforementioned level-confusion, he [Preston] evidently holds that God “cannot” self-manifest, and thereby identify himself, to humans without human reliance on speculative reason and its notorious vagaries. Apparently, then, his position implies that God cannot self-manifest, and thereby identify himself, to children. ... We might ask, in this connection, whether *Preston’s manifesting himself* to others requires their reliance on speculative reason of some kind.⁵²

In fact, I am doing neither of these things. I understand the distinction between these two sets of conditions (a) and (b), and don’t think I’m conflating them. I do think that in a sufficiently defeater-rich environment (the sort of environment that Keith DeRose calls a “Super Nasty Land of Fake Barns,” for instance)⁵³ one must meet the conditions in (a) for the evidence one has (*a la* (b)) to confer justification on one’s beliefs. And I think that the religious landscape of our actual world is a good candidate for a “Super Nasty Land of Fake Gods.” Consequently, while I don’t think God is unable to manifest himself to humans, even in ways that include their recognizing Him as God, I do think that there are special challenges to treating a self-manifestation of God as conclusive evidence of God’s existence. And I’d think the same about the evidentiary value of manifesting myself to others in a “Super Nasty Land of Fake Prestons.” In these scenarios, it might well take some speculative reasoning to raise what’s given *via* self-manifestation to the level of justification-conferring evidence, let alone conclusive evidence.

But these matters are tangential to the point I was trying to make, which has to do with the (non-propositional) content of the *agape* flood. The question is whether the flood is superior to ANTs in directing consciousness to the right intentional object for theistic belief and knowledge – for this is the advantage

⁵² Ibid., pp. 14-15.

⁵³ See DeRose’s essay on the [Prosblogion](#) blog, “[God’s Existence and My Suspicion: Delusions of Knowledge](#).” The section on “Religious Experience” is directly relevant to my worries about PE both as an adequate epistemology and as a disciplinary orienting-point. The “Super Nasty Land of Fake Barns” comes up in DeRose’s comments in the ensuing discussion, [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

claimed for PE in (2). For example, if the *agape* flood is indistinguishable from a movement of conscience, which would be the case if it contained only *agape*-related feelings and attitudes without any explicitly theistic or Christian content, then it doesn't do any better than ANTs in directing consciousness to the right object (God) in the way that matters for theistic knowledge.⁵⁴ It could still have redemptive significance, of course, but it would not have epistemic significance. Here the need to supplement the *agape* flood with propositional reasoning derives *not* from any concern about defending or justifying one's evidence or beliefs, but from the need to connect the experiential contents of the flood with the concept of God in a way that enables us to recognize the flood as pertaining to God.

On the other hand, I acknowledged that if phenomenological analysis reveals that there is in fact no significant content-gap between the *agape* flood and the Christian God, if the experiential contents of *the flood* include elements that generate recognition of God *qua* God, then my objection would be undermined. To settle the matter, I suggested, we'd need to hear more about the phenomenology of "the *agape* flood." Presumably in response to this, Moser tells us more about its content. In one case, he quotes approvingly W.R. Matthews' claim that connecting with *agape*, in the course of learning to love "our fellows, to cultivate the settled and resolute will for their good," we actually connect with God:

...by coming to know what love means we shall come to know what God means, and by realizing its power, its reality as a human force, we shall be in contact with a power which is more than human, with the creative energy of the world.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Once could still say that consciousness is directed toward God insofar as God is *agape*, and that would be true, but it wouldn't yield the right sort of cognitive state to count as theistic knowledge since it wouldn't involve any recognition of God as God. On the other hand, if we allow this to count as theistic knowledge, then NT would escape Moser's compliant in (2) since, insofar as God is the prime mover, the greatest conceivable being, etc., various ANTs would also count as being *of* or *about* God in the same sense that an experience of *agape* is.

⁵⁵ Moser, "Gethsemane Epistemology," pp. 2-3.

This is a lovely idea, but I'm not sure it helps Moser's case. Matthews makes two distinct claims here. One is an epistemic claim that I take to be false unless it is carefully qualified: "by coming to know what love means we shall come to know what God means." Now I take it that by "coming to know what x means" Matthews does not have in mind a purely semantic phenomenon, like coming to know the definition of a word. I take it he means "coming to know x experientially," including coming to know "what x is like," the phenomenal character of x (as in the Mark Schultz song, 'What It Means to Be Loved'). But however we take it, this claim runs smack into the content-gap, since "love" and "God" have different meanings, and both their concepts and their experiential manifestations have different, even if overlapping, contents. Because the contents overlap, it is true that in "coming to know what love means" we come to know *something central* to a proper understanding of God, but this is not the same as *coming to a proper understanding of God* for the simple reason that coming to know love need not involve any cognitive recognition of God as God. Coming to know the part is not coming to know the whole. Perhaps we can say that knowing love counts as knowing God in some non-cognitive sense of "knowing," – perhaps some form of ontological union analogous to the way that "Adam knew Eve his wife..." (Gen. 4:1). But this sort of "knowing" lacks the epistemic advantage claimed for PE in (2), since it does not involve the mind's being directed to God as God. And in any case it is not the sense of "knowing" relevant to epistemology, even Christian epistemology. There is no *direct* and *internal* cognitive route from the content (semantic, conceptual or non-conceptual) pertaining to love, to content capable of presenting God *qua* God. We can close the content-gap by *interpreting* love "as a human force" as a manifestation of God's being, but only if we already accept the Christian concept of God on other grounds. And given an exclusive disjunction between PE and spectator evidence, these "other grounds" will be spectator evidence.

Matthews' second claim is that by "realizing" (in the sense of "actualizing") *agape's* "power, its reality as a human force, we shall be in contact with a power which is more than human, with the creative energy of the world." I take this claim to be true. But this does not solve the problem of the content-gap. Given that God "is" *agape*, to exemplify *agape* is indeed to "be in

contact” with God,⁵⁶ but it is not clear that this “contact” is cognitive in nature, as *knowledge* of God surely is (at least the kind of knowledge that epistemology is interested in). No doubt there will be cognitive dimensions to every case of human *agape*-exemplification, but there is no reason to suppose that they must include knowledge of God *qua* God. Moser himself affirms this in developing his version of Christian inclusivism (which I heartily endorse). He says: “One could yield volitionally to God’s unselfish love and thereby to God *de re*, without any corresponding acknowledgment *de dicto* and *thus without one’s knowing (or believing) that God exists.*”⁵⁷ What Matthews describes as coming to know *agape* “as a human force” seems to fit this description. And it is not clear what, from within the experience of *agape* as a human force, would lead one to recognize that it is “a power which is more than human,” let alone “the creative energy of the world.” Again, while to experience *agape* is, in an important sense, to experience “what God is like,” this alone does not constitute or otherwise yield knowledge of God *qua* God. Thus Matthews’ statements do not, to my mind, elucidate the phenomenology of the *agape* flood in a way that saves GE from my objection.

But Moser makes several further remarks about the phenomenology of the *agape* flood which are more promising. In one place he says that the *agape* flood “involves an I – Thou acquaintance relation between a human will and God’s will,”⁵⁸ and later he adds that it is accompanied by filial knowledge whereby we recognize that we stand in a child-parent relationship to the aforementioned *Thou*.⁵⁹ Clearly, an experience that conjoins the cognitive and affective aspects of (i) experiencing and exemplifying *agape* with those of (ii) being aware that one stands in an I-Thou relationship to a non-human *Thou*, and those of (iii) being aware that this relationship is a filial relationship, is rather different than coming to know *agape* “as a human force” by learning to love “our fellows, to cultivate the settled and resolute will for their good.” On

⁵⁶ See my “Redeeming Moral Formation: The Unity of Moral and Spiritual Formation in Willardian Thought,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 3:3 (2010), 206-229.

⁵⁷ Paul Moser, *The Evidence for God* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 251. Final italics mine. NB - the statement clearly assumes that *de dicto* awareness of God is required for “knowledge that God exists.” Such knowledge is what we’re interested in in religious epistemology.

⁵⁸ Moser, “Gethsemane Epistemology,” p. 4.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

this expanded description of the *agape* flood, it has unique contents which make it obvious, from within the experience itself, that *agape* is not merely “a human force.” In fact, it now seems that one could not experience the *agape* flood without recognizing, *via* the flood itself, that there is a loving, authoritative, spiritual *Thou* with whom we stand in a filial relationship and who calls us to exemplify *agape*.

So there is at least less of a content-gap between the experience and the Christian God. And perhaps there is no gap at all. In describing the filial content of the *agape* flood, Moser quotes Romans 8: 15-16: “You have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” It is not clear to me whether this is supposed to involve the explicit recognition that the *Abba* to which we cry is God. If so, then the content-gap is entirely eliminated. If not, one still might worry that the content-gap between the flood and God is too great for it to have a significant epistemic advantage over any given ANT, for then it seems that the flood’s *Thou* could be taken for some sort of spiritual underling – an angel, say – who might count as “Abba! Father!” in virtue of creating not the universe, but only our species (perhaps by guiding the process of evolution), or in virtue of providentially superintending planet earth, but not the rest of the universe, and so on.

In this case, I’d think that the *Thou* revealed in *the flood* would be identifiable as *God* only in light of Christianity’s propositional revelation about God. It would be in putting the experience together with the propositional claims of Christianity, claims to the effect that God is *agape* and is behind the *agape* flood, that we close the gap. This would not be a matter of trying to defend or justify our beliefs, but only of trying to connect the contents of our experience with the concept⁶⁰ of God. But this “connecting,” this “putting

⁶⁰ Alternatively, it could be connected with a non-conceptual conscious state whose non-conceptual contents present God as God. Even so, there would have to be some way of connecting the experience of *agape* “as a human force” with this other experience, just as the experience of seeing a brown rectangle is experientially connected to the experience of seeing a table in such a way that we can, through an appropriate unfolding of experience, come to see that the brown rectangle is an aspect of the table’s surface. Moser has hinted that such connections may exist (for instance, when he says that the I-Thou relation revealed in *the flood* “can deepen and become more salient over time” (Moser, “Gethsemane Epistemology,” p. 4), but as yet we do not have a thorough account of how to follow-up on the appearance of *agape* in consciousness so as to make plain that it is an aspect of God.

together,” would naturally use some of the same forms of reasoning employed in those other endeavors. Hence I maintain that, insofar as there is a content-gap between the *agape* flood and the theistic knowledge, the experience of *the flood* must be combined with reasoning in order to make it evident that the flood is a manifestation of God.

But is there a content gap? As we saw above, on one reading of the expanded description, there is no gap, and GE is therefore superior to NT in the way specified in (2). However, this raises a different problem. Indeed, on either reading of the expanded description – whether or not *the flood’s* contents present its *Thou* as God – it is not clear to me how the description fits with Moser’s inclusivism. Moser invokes his inclusivism to rebut (what he takes to be) my objection to his view that God alone can empower human *agape*: namely, that the existence of *agape*-empowered non-Christians renders this implausible. To this he responds that his inclusivism “allows for God to work redemptively in people who are not self-avowed Christians”⁶¹ via the *de-re-but-not-de-dicto* interaction described above. But Moser misunderstands my objection. It was given in a footnote that begins with questions about the phenomenology of the *agape* flood. Observing that Moser makes comments which seem to imply that the flood includes a presentation of God *qua* God, the note calls for a fine-grained description of the flood’s content. Only against this background does it raise the worry about God alone empowering human *agape*. Hence the objection is *not* that the existence of *agape*-empowered non-Christians is inconsistent with God being the only source of *agape*-empowerment. It is, rather, that their existence is inconsistent with (i) God being the only source of *agape*-empowerment, and (ii) *agape*-empowerment coming via the *agape* flood, and (iii) the *agape* flood including a presentation of God *qua* God. If all three of these conditions were true, we would expect all *agape*-empowered people to be at least theists, if not Christians, since in receiving *agape* they would also receive conclusive evidence of God’s existence and nature as the source of the very *agape* that empowers them. (Perhaps one can tell a convincing story about how a person might accept God’s *agape*-empowerment while rejecting the accompanying presentation of God *qua* God, but I doubt it.) Hence the objection is that if *agape*-empowerment is conjoined to a presentation of God *qua* God, then all *agape*-empowered people should be

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 14.

theists; but some *agape*-empowered people are not theists, and therefore *agape*-empowerment is not conjoined to a presentation of God *qua* God. Moser's inclusivism does not answer this objection; rather, the objection poses a problem *for* his inclusivism by pitting his view that the *agape* flood has content sufficient to make God *qua* God evident, against his view that one can experience *agape* empowerment (presumably through the *agape* flood) without God *qua* God becoming evident.

Of course, the real point of this objection is not to challenge Moser's inclusivism, which I like very much, but to challenge the purported superiority of GE/PE to NT and other putative sources of theistic knowledge. The point is that, if securing for PE the kind of epistemic superiority described in (2) requires us to add explicit theistic content to the *agape* flood, and if this in turn forces us to deny that one can be *agape*-empowered without having robust theistic beliefs, we should give up PE's purported epistemic superiority as described in (2).

In closing, I wish to reiterate that I agree with Moser that there is currently an unfortunate and damaging bias in favor of spectator evidence in the Philosophy of Religion, and in Christian philosophical circles more generally. I agree that it is well worth campaigning for the equal recognition of non-propositional evidence of all sorts, including and especially PE. But I am wary of the notion that a Christian Philosophy must embrace an equal but opposite imbalance the likes of which Moser, in his opposition to NT, seems to endorse.

Aaron Preston is Associate Professor and Chair of the Philosophy department at Valparaiso University in Valparaiso, IN.