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On the Purported Superiority of Gethsemane Epistemology

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Abstract: In this paper, I explore the purported superiority of Moser's Gethsemane epistemology to alternatives like natural theology. The topic is worthwhile in its own right, but also because it is closely related to the worry that Moser's vision for Christian philosophy is unduly narrow.

I. Introduction

In "Christ-Shaped Philosophy,"¹ Paul Moser develops a vision for Christian philosophy grounded in a particular account of religious epistemology ("Gethsemane epistemology").² As is clear from several related works,³ the idea of Gethsemane epistemology is itself grounded in a particular understanding of Christian theology, or at least certain aspects thereof, including atonement, grace, free will, and, above all, the moral character of God (call this "Moserian theology"). Thus, Moser offers us a unified theological-epistemological-disciplinary perspective which would entail a reform of disciplinary practice among Christian philosophers generally, but particularly among those working in the philosophy of religion.

¹ Available here: [http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Moser%20\(Christ-Shaped%20Philosophy\).pdf](http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Moser%20(Christ-Shaped%20Philosophy).pdf).

² In an important sense, the idea of Gethsemane epistemology is grounded not in any theological views or arguments, but in the experience of pneumatic evidence. *Ex hypothesi*, no further ground is needed beyond the experience itself. And yet Moser provides a theological argument for Gethsemane epistemology, presumably for the benefit of those who have not had the relevant experience. Thus there is a respect in which even Moser presents Gethsemane epistemology as a theory grounded in more fundamental theological theories. And for those who have not had the relevant experience, this seems to be the only way to approach Moser's thought. For those in this category (and I may be one), it is hard not to see Moser's theory of Gethsemane epistemology grounded in his theological theories.

³ *The Elusive God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), *The Evidence for God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), *The Severity of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

In both cases, the required change involves a shift away from impersonal, abstract, *de dicto*, propositional knowledge (e.g., “spectator evidence” and the kind of knowledge it grounds), and toward a morally transformative/redemptive, personal, *de re* knowledge of God in the form of “pneumatic evidence.” Such evidence is a matter of God revealing Himself in a self-authenticating way in or through such things as (i) the voice of conscience, which invites us into a “Gethsemane struggle” between selfishness and selfless submission to the Divine will as expressed in Christianity’s love commands, and, in the context of that struggle (ii) an agent-power that facilitates moral-*cum*-spiritual victory by flooding the sufficiently-willing human with Divine agape. This “agape flood” is understood to be no mere psychological state, but a manifestation of God’s Spirit, through which one enters into “Gethsemane union” with Christ Himself. Moser’s view is that the philosophy of religion as a philosophical sub-discipline, and Christian philosophers regardless of sub-discipline, should orient philosophical work around (the possibility of? the actuality of?) this sort of theistic-evidence-*cum*-religious-experience. To do so is to move from the “discussion mode” of contemporary philosophy to the “obedience mode” of Christian, or Christ-Shaped, philosophy.

Content-wise, my theological views are very similar to Moser’s. We’ve even been influenced by some of the same, lesser-known figures like Oman, Baillie and Stewart. Thus I am friendly to the idea that something like “Gethsemane epistemology” plays a special role in God’s redemptive purposes, and that it deserves more attention than it has received in the philosophy of religion, and among Christian philosophers generally. However, I am sufficiently impressed with the ambiguities in all of my past and current sources of evidence on the relevant theological and epistemic issues – from the Bible, to the broad Judeo-Christian tradition, to my own religious experiences (including experiences of conscience that seem to fit the Gethsemane model) – that I feel it would be a mistake to depart from the relatively detached, dispassionate forms of rational thought characteristic of “discussion mode philosophy” even within Gethsemane epistemology. Thus, I worry that Moser claims too much for Gethsemane epistemology, especially as concerns the purported superiority of pneumatic evidence to other forms of evidence about God (all of which, I suppose, fall into the category of spectator evidence), and hence also as an orienting point for Christian philosophy.

This worry is related to another, raised by a number of contributors to this symposium – namely, that Moser’s vision for Christian philosophy is too narrow, and that he desires a correspondingly sweeping reform of the discipline. For instance, Tedla Woldeyohannes has worried that Moser’s

contrast between “obedience mode” and “discussion mode” amounts to an exclusive disjunction, and argued for the possibility of a hybrid “obedient discussion mode” of philosophizing.⁴ Likewise, William Hasker has worried that Moser’s vision for Christian philosophy would exclude many subjects of philosophical and historical significance.⁵

Moser has resisted these characterizations of his position. To Woldeyohannes Moser replied that the hybrid position was unnecessary since he in fact accepts that “discussion mode” philosophizing can be used selectively within “obedience mode” when it serves a redemptive purpose.⁶ Likewise, he complained that Hasker had misrepresented his views and had set up a straw man.⁷ What’s more, in discussing “contributing to God’s redemptive purposes” as a criterion for inclusion in Christian philosophy, Moser recommends a sensible particularism: one must make the best judgment one can in light of the centrality of God’s redemptive purposes and the limitations of human life.⁸

Given this track record, we should give Moser the benefit of the doubt when it comes to worries about undue narrowness and sweeping reform in his vision for Christian philosophy. Nonetheless, such worries persist, particularly concerning the place of natural theology in Moser’s vision. I will explore this further below, but the point to note here is that whatever narrowness there may be in Moser’s view of Christian philosophy seems to be grounded in his high estimation (in my view an overestimation) of the evidentiary value of pneumatic evidence relative to alternatives. Because I find it problematic in its own right, and because it is foundational to the worry about disciplinary narrowness, my aim here is to critique the idea that pneumatic evidence is superior to spectator evidence, at least in any way that would warrant using the former as a *definiens* for Christian philosophy and an orienting point for disciplinary reform.

II. The social dimension of epistemic superiority.

Moser’s view is that the pneumatic evidence of Gethsemane epistemology is both epistemically and redemptively superior to the spectator

⁴ Tedla Woldeyohannes, “[On Moser's Christ-Centered Metaphilosophy](#)”

⁵ William Hasker, “[Paul Moser’s Christian Philosophy](#)”, “[Two Wisdoms, Two Philosophies: A Rejoinder to Moser](#)”

⁶ Paul Moser, “[Christian Philosophy without Sociology: Reply to Tedla Woldeyohannes](#),” pp. 1-2.

⁷ Paul Moser, “[A Rejoinder to the Rejoinders of Graham Oppy and William Hasker](#),” pp. 2-3.

⁸ Paul Moser, “[Doing and Teaching Christian Philosophy: Reply to McFall](#),” pp. 2-4.

evidence available from other sources such as natural theology. Its dual superiority is accounted for by the fact that, *ex hypothesi*, pneumatic evidence is a self-authenticating presentation of the morally-perfect God Himself. As such, it is both *immediate, de re* evidence of God's reality (whence its epistemic superiority), and morally-challenging to the person who experiences it (whence its redemptive superiority).

But note that, in an important respect, Gethsemane epistemology's redemptive superiority depends on its epistemic superiority: the mere fact that the experience of pneumatic evidence is morally challenging in a way that, e.g., thinking through the *kalam* cosmological argument is not, will have no redemptive significance unless that moral challenge is rightly related to God (at the very least, the moral contours of the challenge must correspond to God's moral nature). Thus, for us to accept the redemptive superiority of Gethsemane epistemology, it must be highly credible the experience of pneumatic evidence is indeed an experience of God. Consequently, I will focus here on the purported epistemic superiority of Gethsemane epistemology, granting that, if its epistemic advantage is genuine, then so is its redemptive advantage.

But we must narrow the focus even further. *In theory*, and *in itself*, it is highly plausible that Gethsemane epistemology has the advantage Moser claims for it. Although it is not entirely clear to me what "self-authenticating" means in more familiar epistemic terms (is it equivalent to "self-evident" or "certain"?), it seems that on any plausible interpretation a self-authenticating presentation of God Himself, given directly to consciousness, would have an epistemic advantage over indirect presentations of God via propositions and arguments. But what matters for practical purposes, like making religious commitments and calling for disciplinary reform, is not the epistemic superiority some source of evidence possesses *in theory* or even *in itself*, but its epistemic superiority *for us* and *in practice*. Should it turn out that pneumatic evidence exists but that it is not available to us, we can affirm that it still has an epistemic advantage over spectator evidence, but this would hardly warrant using it as an orienting-point for an academic discipline.

Furthermore, it will likewise fail as an adequate disciplinary orienting-point if it proves to be accessible only to a chosen few. An individual who possess pneumatic evidence may well be justified in ignoring or even disparaging spectator evidence, but it makes little sense to idealize the reconstruction of an academic discipline around something inaccessible to the majority of practitioners; nor, of course, does it make sense to actually call for such reconstruction. Thus, the superiority that matters for the disciplinary use Moser wishes to make of pneumatic evidence is *evidentiary superiority for us and in practice*, where the relevant "us" is at least Christian philosophers (if not also

Christians who are not philosophers, and possibly other sincere seekers of religious truth).

This means that there is an unavoidable sociological dimension to the question of epistemic superiority in this context. In a previous discussion with Tedla Woldeyohannes,⁹ Moser sought to avoid entanglement with sociological considerations.¹⁰ However, as Woldeyohannes pointed out, it's hard to make sense of Moser's overall position without attributing to him some fairly robust sociological beliefs, and in some cases he seems to hold such beliefs quite explicitly.¹¹ As we shall see, the sociological dimension of epistemic superiority causes problems for Moser's overall view in several ways.

III. Gethsemane epistemology vs. natural theology.

In much of the discussion following “Christ-Shaped Philosophy,” the contest between pneumatic evidence and spectator evidence has taken the form of a contest between Gethsemane epistemology and natural theology. As I understand it, natural theology is but one source of spectator evidence for God – one might also get such evidence from, say, religious training or the academic study of dogmatic theology (especially if one studies the history of doctrinal controversies). But of course it makes sense for philosophers to devote special attention to natural theology rather than to these other sources of spectator evidence. So we can look to the contest between Gethsemane epistemology and natural theology as an example of the broader contest between pneumatic- and spectator-evidence. (This is also one of the areas in which worries about disciplinary narrowness persist.)

Moser's view is that the arguments of natural theology (hereafter, ANTs) are “seriously deficient in making a contribution to Christian philosophy,”¹² whereas Gethsemane epistemology, with its pneumatic evidence, is not. Moser's central objections to ANTs (repeated in several places) are:

- (1) Many intelligent people, theists and non-theists alike, Christians and non-Christians alike, do not find them cogent.
- (2) Even if they were cogent, they would not demonstrate the existence of a deity who is a personal agent, let alone the Christian God of self-

⁹ Woldeyohannes, “[On Moser's Christ-Centered Metaphilosophy](#)”

¹⁰ Moser, “[Christian Philosophy without Sociology: Reply to Tedla Woldeyohannes](#),” pp. 1-2.

¹¹ Woldeyohannes, “[A Missed Opportunity: Reply to Moser](#)”

¹² Moser, “[On Traditional Philosophy and Natural Theology: A Rejoinder](#)” p. 4.

sacrificing love for all (even enemies), but only of some lesser god like an Aristotelian prime mover.

He also makes at least two other objections relevant to ANTs, although they are less about ANT's themselves and more about the way Christian philosophers working in the philosophy of religion tend to regard and focus on them:

- (3) Paying too much attention to ANTs (as is the norm in contemporary philosophy of religion) causes us to ignore Gethsemane epistemology.
- (4) 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).

I am in complete sympathy with objection (3), but it does not speak to the purported epistemic superiority of Gethsemane epistemology the way the others do. Each of the others identifies a respect in which ANTs or endorsement thereof are problematic, and in which Gethsemane epistemology is (purportedly) not.

Thus, in (1), the idea is not only that ANTs are deficient in that many fail to find them cogent, but that Gethsemane epistemology is not deficient in this way. In positive terms, the idea is that pneumatic evidence is readily available to willing people, so that we may reasonably expect a substantial number of Christians (including philosophers) to recognize from their own experience the phenomena of Gethsemane epistemology and verify Moser's claims about it. Obviously, this is one of those places in Moser's position where the sociological dimension of epistemic superiority is close to the surface. In fact, in (1), it is quite explicit. Furthermore, I agree that (1) is true – obviously so, to anyone familiar with contemporary philosophy of religion. However, I doubt the corresponding sociological claim favoring Gethsemane epistemology. From my own experience, and from what I know of others' experience, plenty of willing people lack religious experience with the evidentiary-superiority-to-spectator-evidence that Moser attributes to pneumatic evidence.

This is certainly true of my own experience (more on which later). Of course, appeal to personal experience has limited epistemic value for others. But in this case I do not think my epistemic situation is unique. I think it's entirely normal, and that having the kind of evidence Moser idealizes is highly unusual, even for humans who are willing to cooperate with God. Consider a few well-known cases. First, William Rowe and John Rawls. Insofar as both of these men were, for a time, Christians serious enough to pursue theological

education in preparation for possible careers in ministry, we have good reason to think they were willing to cooperate with God to an appreciable extent. And yet, as we all know, each ended-up losing his faith, at least in part from the sort of cognitive disappointment against which pneumatic evidence is supposed to be proof. Or take the case of Gandhi, who was arguably considerably more cooperative with God vis-a-vis the love commands than most Christians, but who apparently did not receive from God evidence sufficient to motivate a conversion to Christianity. Or consider the case of Mother Teresa, who, although she had profound experiences of God at various points along her journey some of which likely fit the model of Gethsemane epistemology, ultimately entered a “dark night” in which she had no self-authenticating experiences of God for a remarkably long time. I submit that these cases are illustrative of the experience of *many* Christians and spiritual seekers. If that’s right,¹³ then Gethsemane epistemology has a cogency problem on par with natural theology’s,¹⁴ and it does not have the advantage adumbrated in objection (1).

¹³ Moser (and others) may object that this is a pretty big “if”. Their sense of what’s normal for the religious experience of Christians (etc.) may be quite different from mine. And while I agree in general with Woldeyohannes’ point (in the debate referenced above) that we do not need exact statistical data to make judgments about sociological norms (as the problem of the speckled hen suggests), we may well need such data to resolve disputes about such norms when those with “ordinary familiarity” have conflicting intuitions.

¹⁴ It’s not clear to me how best to express this cogency problem: perhaps “there are many people for whom pneumatic evidence is not cogent,” or “for many, Gethsemane epistemology is not a cogent model of religious epistemology.” In these formulations I am using “cogent” in its ordinary sense of “convincing.” However, if Moser means to use it in a narrower sense that applies only to arguments and not to experiences, then substitute for “cogent” whatever you take to be the appropriate experiential analog. Alternatively, Tedla Woldeyohannes suggested that one might retain “cogent” and apply the criticism not directly to the experience of pneumatic evidence or the model of Gethsemane epistemology, but to an argument for it which Moser gives in *The Elusive God* and *The Evidence for God*:

1. Necessarily, if a human person is offered, and unselfishly receives, the transformative gift, then this is the result of the authoritative leading and sustaining power of a divine X of thoroughgoing forgiveness, fellowship in perfect love, worthiness of worship, and triumphant hope (namely, God).
2. I have been offered, and have willingly unselfishly received, the transformative gift.
3. Therefore, God exists.

The idea is that many people will not find this argument cogent because the truth of 2 remains uncertain for them given the ambiguous, or at least not-obviously-theistic, nature of their experience. Indeed, many Christians today and in the past have been plagued with uncertainty over whether they have been offered, and whether they have really received, “the

Furthermore, whether such cases are many or few, they require explaining, for they seem to fly in the face of Moser's view that pneumatic evidence is readily available to willing people. So far as I can tell, there are three general possibilities for explaining such cases:

- (a) the criterion of cooperativeness (for receiving pneumatic evidence) is true and their (Rowe's, Rawls', Gandhi's, Mother Teresa's, etc.) cooperativeness is/was in some way defective, or
- (b) their cooperativeness is/was not defective and the criterion of cooperativeness is false, or
- (c) the criterion is true, their cooperativeness is/was not defective, but their lack of pneumatic evidence was merely apparent – they had it and responded “in faith” to it insofar as they remained committed to the love commands, regardless of the presence, absence, or details of any explicitly theistic or religious content in their experiences and beliefs.

One might think that option (a) provides an easy way out for Moser, but this is not so. For one thing, it is highly implausible in some cases, like those of Mother Teresa and Gandhi. But more generally, to adopt (a) is to forfeit the advantage for Gethsemane epistemology adumbrated in objection (4), above. The full idea adumbrated in (4) is not merely that insisting on the cogency of ANTs insults the intelligence of the dissenters mentioned in (1), but that Gethsemane epistemology does not, and that this constitutes a significant advantage for the latter. But insofar as Moser wants to explain people's lack of pneumatic evidence as a function of their unwillingness to cooperate morally with God, it would seem that Moser avoids insulting their intelligence only by insulting their characters: they may not be cognitively defective, but they're morally defective insofar as they're too selfish to embrace the love commands. Surely this is equally insulting if not more insulting than being declared cognitively deficient (personally, I'd rather be dumb than selfish or wicked).

What of option(c)? In that case, Gethsemane epistemology loses the advantage adumbrated in (2), since (c) proposes the same sort of content-gap between pneumatic evidence and the Christian God that (2) attributes to ANTs (one is tempted to say “conceptual gap,” but given that Gethsemane epistemology deals in direct experience there, there may well be nonconceptual

gift” (usually expressed as a worry over whether they have really “been saved”). Luther was preoccupied with precisely this problem until his “tower experience” resolved it for him; in the Reformed tradition, Jonathan Edwards tried to solve the problem with his well-known *Treatise concerning Religious Affections*, etc.

content involved). Furthermore, for this same reason, (c) would seem to disqualify Gethsemane epistemology as an appropriate basis for a distinctively Christian philosophy, since there would not be anything distinctively Christian about it.

That leaves option (b). But this option forces us to rethink the basis upon which pneumatic evidence is given. I'm inclined to think that such evidence *is* sometimes bestowed upon people, but that this has more to do with God's particular purposes in particular cases than with His general redemptive purposes and the willingness of individual humans to cooperate with them. For instance, in the case of the Apostle Paul – whom Moser quotes repeatedly to validate his claims about pneumatic evidence¹⁵ – the richness of his experience of God arguably had more to do with his special mission as “the Apostle to the Gentiles” than with his own willingness to cooperate with God. Indeed, as Saul, Paul seems to have been decidedly *unwilling* to cooperate with God-as-revealed-in-Jesus – at least until God manifested Himself in a dramatic way that might well be classified as coercive (if I were to blind you and make receiving your vision back contingent on following my instructions, wouldn't that be coercive?). Of course we should resist such classification. Plausibly, Paul's psychology (as Saul) was a complex mixture of willingnesses and unwillingnesses, and God's actions toward Paul were consistent with some of these, so that they were not fully and clearly coercive. But most of us are complex mixtures like this, so why did Paul get special treatment? Again, his special mission. But why was he chosen for that mission? Again, probably not on the criterion of willingness alone, in which Paul seems to have been murderously deficient. Plausibly, other personal characteristics (intelligence, personality, etc.) and social characteristics (such as education and social roles, such as being a Pharisee, a zealous persecutor of the Church, and a Roman citizen) played a role in God's decision to select Saul/Paul for this mission, and hence to give him epistemically superior, pneumatic evidence.

There may be other plausible criteria for the bestowal/receipt of pneumatic evidence, but the one I have suggested gives us no reason to suppose it would be readily available to large numbers of people. Consequently, it gives us no reason to think that pneumatic evidence has evidentiary superiority *for us* and *in practice*. It would therefore fail as a superior alternative to natural theology as a disciplinary orienting point. Of course, that's not to say that the advantage falls to natural theology, either. I am happy to support the notion that both deserve attention from Christian philosophers,

¹⁵ Paul Moser, “[Beyond Spectator Evidence to Pneumatic Evidence: Reply to Charles Taliaferro](#)” pp. 6-7.

and from philosophers of religion generally, and I agree with Moser that current norms are quite out of balance in favoring natural theology.

IV. Pneumatic evidence and the nature of moral experience.

On Moser's view, the experience of conscience figures prominently in his account of pneumatic evidence. While he does not limit pneumatic evidence to the experience of conscience, the latter seems to be a preferred mode of divine self-manifestation in Moser's theory. However, I submit that close attention to actual moral experience, even among Christians, provides little support for this view.

I take myself to be, and certainly to *have been* earlier in life (in the idealism of youth), highly willing to cooperate with God in exactly the way Moser specifies (by committing oneself to overcoming selfishness and fulfilling Jesus' love commands). However, I am not able to identify anything in my experience that merits the description "a self-authenticating experience of God Himself." And I take myself to be representative of the norm in this regard. Perhaps barring cases of psychopathy, everyone feels the "Gethsemane struggle" between egoism and altruism, but it is far from obvious that this is also a struggle between our human wills and God's will. What's more, many people end up overcoming their own selfishness to an appreciable degree without their moral experience ever transforming into a self-authenticating experience of God Himself.

Despite the content-gap between moral experience and the Christian God, moral experience has always been at the heart of my own religious experience and commitment. But this is because, to the extent that my moral experience (including and especially certain deliverances of conscience) incline me to embrace the love commands, I am willing to *interpret* the former as possible manifestations of "the voice of God." However, I am acutely aware that this is an interpretation of an experience that, in itself, is not obviously theistic, let alone Christian. I am willing to employ this interpretation largely because the moral teachings of (some versions of) Christianity resonate with my pre-religious moral experience. But in order to connect my moral experience to the Christian God more substantially, I find that something like John Henry Newman's analysis of conscience, or Knud Logstrup's analysis of

“the ethical demand,”¹⁶ is required (not to mention various ANTs that, for me, make it rational to believe in a being that has some of the other traditionally-affirmed Divine attributes). But these analyses are constructions of speculative reason, joining spectator evidence to the data of experience along the lines of an “inference to the best explanation,” and this serves only to make the Christian interpretation of conscience reasonable or plausible. It is not conclusive, as pneumatic evidence is supposed to be.

The two preceding paragraphs can be taken, respectively, as providing additional reasons for thinking that Gethsemane epistemology lacks the advantages adumbrated in the anti-ANT objections (1) and (2) from the previous section: to the extent that the moral experience of willing persons is not intrinsically theistic/Christian, there will be a cogency problem for Gethsemane epistemology, and, as with ANTs, there will be a content-gap between moral experience and the Christian God. However, in this section I wish to emphasize a further problem for Gethsemane epistemology. Unless the experience of pneumatic evidence is phenomenologically distinct from ordinary experiences of conscience (in which case we await a more thorough description of this experience from Moser¹⁷), we must suppose that it involves the sort of interpretation described above (a Christian interpretation of a non-theistic experience). But for any such interpretation to be rational, we must have good reasons for adopting it, and it seems that any such reasons will be items of spectator evidence.

What’s more, I submit that given the ambiguities of moral experience, one cannot responsibly interpret any particular deliverance of conscience as the voice of God without using the relatively detached, dispassionate forms of

¹⁶ See the NDPR by Stephen Darwall (03-05-10): <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24307-beyond-the-ethical-demand-book-1-and-concern-for-the-other-perspectives-on-the-ethics-of-k-e-l-248-gstrup-book-2/>

¹⁷ Moser has given some descriptions of “the Gethsemane struggle” that suggest he takes it to have a unique phenomenology (see, e.g., *The Severity of God*, pp. 88-90), but they all seem to *assume* that God *qua* God is self-evident in the experience, but that is precisely the element of the experience that needs to be phenomenologically distinguished from ordinary moral experience. He has also suggested that only God has the ability to empower people to enact agape love for enemies (e.g., [On Traditional Philosophy and Natural Theology: A Rejoinder](#), p. 7). This would be plausible if this power was something we saw only in Christians, but pretty clearly that’s not the case (again witness Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, countless peaceable people I knew growing up in the post-hippy culture of Northern California in the 1970s and 80s, etc.). Again, there is frequently a content-gap between the views of people who have this power (even their views about the power itself) and Christian teachings. It would also be plausible on option (c), above, but again that involves a content-gap between the moral and theological domains.

rational thought characteristic of “discussion mode philosophy” as a screening mechanism. Moral reasoning usually involves both speculative and practical reasoning, but both make considerable use of propositions and arguments, and so “spectator evidence.”

If these points are correct, then, far from being superior to ordinary practices of reasoning involving spectator evidence, the Gethsemane model depends upon them, both for its responsible adoption as a general interpretative schema for moral experience, and for its application in any particular case.

V. Pneumatic evidence and theological disagreement.

There is another respect in which Gethsemane epistemology cannot separate itself from ordinary modes of reasoning: the Gethsemane model is grounded in Moserian theology, but Moserian theology consists in a number of propositions which themselves are the results of reasoning about what’s consistent with a God worthy of worship. The bedrock concept of Moserian theology is the idea that “God” is “a supreme title of personal perfection ... requiring *worthiness of worship*,” where the latter is taken to rule out all moral defects including interpersonal dynamics involving domination or the idea that “might makes right”.¹⁸ I find this idea highly appealing – surely this is how God ought to be! But in fact this is a highly contentious claim, as the history of Christian theological controversy reveals. Christians have *always* disagreed over just how justice and mercy, or power and goodness, fit together to yield a worship-worthy God – and in fact “worship-worthiness” is a good candidate for an essentially-contested concept. The question of whether “might makes right” for God was itself central to the late-medieval dispute between the nominalist/voluntarist and realist/essentialist conceptions of God. And far from being an abstruse medieval controversy, it, and particularly the nominalist/voluntarist position, decisively shaped both Protestant theology and Modern Philosophy in ways that continue to have effects in both religious and secular spheres.¹⁹ Thus, When Moser insists that

¹⁸ Moser, *The Severity of God*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁹ See Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) and *Nihilism before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Parts of Brad S. Gregory’s *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012) are also relevant.

...God must merit being God on moral grounds. No big bad bully, therefore, will qualify as being God just in virtue of strength, power, or even omnipotence. An impeccable moral standing is needed, and this excludes all of the candidates who, however powerful, do evil to get their way. Being God does not allow for getting your way however you wish, because moral perfection must be preserved.²⁰

he simply begs the question against the nominalist/voluntarist position, which allows God to get His way however He wishes *and* count as morally perfect by making God's unfettered will determinative of moral (and all other) reality.

Now, I think that the nominalist/voluntarist position is both absurd and pernicious, and I suspect Moser would agree. But I see no way to refute it decisively, and hence no way to provide decisive support for the infinitely preferable (to me) alternative that Moser endorses. Because it makes all sources of objectivity and normativity (cognitive and moral) subject to an omnipotent and arbitrary will, anything is consistent with anything else, and nothing is a sure sign of anything else; thus appeal to experience is no better than appeal to argument – both are equally impotent to decisively refute the nominalist/voluntarist position. The best I've been able to do to keep this pernicious view at arm's length is to tentatively put my faith in reason, and my hope in an inference to the best explanation, where that "best explanation" looks a lot like Moserian theology. But now: to the extent that the Gethsemane model of religious epistemology depends on Moserian theology, and the latter depends on an inference to the best explanation, Gethsemane epistemology again seems to depend on ordinary forms of reasoning involving spectator evidence.

VI. A concluding thought.

Several times already I have supposed that my own experience is representative of the norm in a certain population. Another respect in which I take myself to be entirely normal among Christians is that I'd like to be able to transcend the realm of propositions, inference and arguments, the realm of spectator evidence, and to have a direct experience of God Himself in which it is certain (or at least pretty close) that I am experiencing God *qua* God – rather than *qua* The Good, or *qua* the Categorical Imperative, or *qua* a particular moral fact or feeling, like a flood of compassion in a particular case. I hope that such an experience is possible, and that it will at some point be actual. But I do not take any such experience to be readily available to human beings "in this age".

²⁰ Moser, *The Severity of God*, p. 13.

Moser seems to disagree. Perhaps this is because his own religious experience is quite different from mine. That is entirely possible. But it has also occurred to me that maybe, just maybe, it is because his theological and epistemic reflections are too narrowly focused on a single aspect of Jesus' experience in Gethsemane (hybridized with components of Paul's religious experience). Perhaps we would do well to remember that Gethsemane is only the beginning of Jesus' passion, and that submission to His Father's will in that setting brought him not filial knowledge but, within a short span, its loss. Rather the reverse of what one would expect on the Gethsemane model, Jesus presumably had a rather vivid experience of the other two members of the Trinity *prior to* Gethsemane, and saying "not your will but mine" in that moment garnered Him not an agape flood of the Spirit's direct presence, but an ordeal of suffering culminating in the cry of dereliction: "O God, my God, why have you forsaken me." Thus, if the Gethsemane experience is supposed to be normative for Christians, perhaps the experience of being forsaken by God is too – in both cases, we hope, scaled down to bearable, merely human proportions. If so, perhaps the general unavailability of religious experiences epistemically superior to spectator evidence is to be expected on theological grounds.

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