

NATURAL THEOLOGY, EVIDENCE, AND EPISTEMIC HUMILITY

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Abstract. One not infrequently hears rumors that the robust practice of natural theology reeks of epistemic pride. Paul Moser’s is a paradigm of such contempt. In this paper we defend the robust practice of natural theology from the charge of epistemic pride. In taking an essentially Thomistic approach, we argue that the evidence of natural theology should be understood as a species of God’s general self-revelation. Thus, an honest assessment of that evidence need not be prideful, but can be an act of epistemic humility, receiving what God has offered, answering God’s call. Lastly, we provide criticisms of Moser’s alternative approach, advancing a variety of philosophical and theological problems against his conception of personifying evidence.

I. INTRODUCTION

One not infrequently hears rumors that the robust practice of natural theology — “proving” God’s existence and that the being so proven to exist has various important properties — reeks of epistemic pride. Paul Moser seems to be particularly apt to report a malodorous scent wafting from the pages of the likes of, say, Thomas Aquinas, Richard Swinburne, and, especially, that scoundrel William Lane Craig.¹ Moser often describes natural theology as “the height of human arrogance”² and “prideful cognitive glory,”³ and the obtaining of such evidence of

¹ Moser’s recommendation for Craig’s vast project of natural theology is that it, like all traditional natural theology, should be abandoned, so as not to “insult the intelligence or the rationality of the unconvinced theorists” (Moser 2014: 81).

² “So it is the height of arrogance for us humans to saunter up to the question whether God exists as if we were automatically in an appropriate moral and cognitive position to handle it reliably” (Moser 2000: 16).

³ “We thus come truly to know God not in our prideful cognitive glory but rather in our volitional weakness relative to the priority of *God’s will*” (Moser 2000: 27).

God as evoking “self-exalting pride.”⁴ However, when one looks for defenses of these theses, they are not clearly forthcoming. In this essay we defend the robust practice of natural theology from such contempt. We provide what we take to be an essentially or at least approximately Thomistic approach. But we officially make no claims of correct systematic exegeses of the text of the Dumb Ox. The essay is, as it were, “based upon a true story.”

II. GROUND CLEARING

To get to the heart of the issue, we must first do some ground clearing. We must remove from before our consideration certain red herrings that, though they don’t deserve it, do pop up quite frequently in such discussions. This section will not be entirely negative, however, for it will prove an apt occasion for establishing some important epistemological themes. By saying what we are *not* saying, we provide context and content for what we *are* saying.

2.1 *Knowing God in Humility*

For the purposes of this paper, we understand epistemic humility in the context of religious epistemology and in contrast to epistemic pride. The specific case of intellectual pride we are concerned with is the alleged God-independent power to discover God and important truths about God. By “God” we have in mind of the Judeo-Christian God who is morally perfect and worthy of worship. Accordingly, a religious epistemology arouses intellectual pride by claiming or implying that one can come to know God and important truths about God apart from grace, apart from God’s activity to accomplish in us what we cannot accomplish with our own powers. Natural theology, we argue, need not be intellectually prideful in this respect.

2.2 *There is Proof and then there is Proof*

The first bit of ground clearing concerns two confusions about the notion of proof. The first is a misconception about *proofs*, the second is a misconception about the *use* of proofs.

⁴ “Self-exalting pride about having evidence for God’s reality can obstruct others from God’s curative endeavor, because it can turn people away from considering God as a truly good reality” (Moser 2015: 415).

One red herring in the investigation of the relationship between the robust practice of natural theology (it's about time we start abbreviating this, RPNT) and epistemic humility concerns the notion of a *proof*. Now "proof" is a bit of an honorific term, tending to connote that the thing proved, *quod erat demonstrandum*, is thereby known with certainty. It is therefore thought that, to some degree, inductive argumentation is humbler, less prideful, than deductive argumentation. That, say, Swinburne's conclusions are humbler than those of St. Thomas or Anselm's or Reichenbach's? This is based on a misconception about deduction. What's true is that deductive arguments transfer without losing the probability of their premises to their conclusions. That is, since in a deductively valid argument there is no possible world where the premises are true and the conclusion false, there is no room for probability. If one were certain of the premises, one could be certain of the conclusion.

The misunderstanding in question arises in part because of selective attention to things Aristotle and certain scholastics say about the premises of arguments in the acquiring of *scientia*. It is true that Aristotle thought that some of the first principles of philosophy and logic could be grasped in such a way as one could be certain of them and that a "proper demonstration" proceeded by a grasp of the essence of the thing being reasoned about. But Aristotle also had that little bit about not expecting more precision than is possible in a given discipline (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b24).

Perhaps sometimes one can have certainty (one of us thinks you *never* can (nope, not even *that*)). But most of the time, at least, we cannot have certainty. Therefore, there is no guarantee of certainty in a deductive argument. You only get certainty out if you put certainty in. Deductive arguments are *salva veritate*, truth-preserving. But that only means you get truth *out* at the conclusion if you put truth *in* at the premises. They are also *salva probabilitas*, probability-preserving. So you only get certainty *out* at the conclusion if you put certainty *in* at the premises.⁵ Thus, even the R of RPNT isn't necessarily prideful certainty-claiming, deductive arguments notwithstanding.

In light of what we have just said and in light of how often one hears complaints about it, a special case is worth mentioning here. The case in Richard

⁵ The rule is that the probability of the conclusion of a deductively valid argument is at least as high as one minus the sum of the uncertainty of the premises.

Swinburne's claim in *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* that the probability that Jesus is incarnate and was resurrected from the dead, on the evidence considered, is 0.97 (Swinburne 2003: 214). The fact is, there is nothing the least bit lacking in humility here, for he is merely reporting his intuitions. You are free to replace them with your own. This is true even if the charge is that the probability estimate is implausibly precise. Swinburne is not claiming any special knowledge or abilities. He is merely saying what seems more probable than not to him and to what degree. Now in some items one might be able easily to see how others could see things quite differently — such as some matter of fairly complex policy — but fail to see how others could see matters very much differently — such as someone ready to vote for Donald Trump. The amazing thing, as Swinburne points out, is that you have to see things very very differently indeed to get the probability of the resurrection to go down very much.⁶

2.3 Paging Dr. Freud

The other red herring regarding proofs concerns their use. Even sometime natural theologian and theodicy Alvin Plantinga occasionally questions the virtue of those practicing theodicy⁷ and natural theology. In his groundbreaking *God and Other Minds*, Plantinga asserts that natural theology aims at a standard of success based on “propositions that are obviously true and accepted by nearly everyone” (Plantinga 1967: 4). But of course all people are somewhat irrational and some people seem all irrational. People are full of biases that prevent evidence from having its rightful effect. It is no part of the aim of natural theology to be convincing to every person. That would be a tall order indeed, and it would be totally lacking in humility to think one could do it. And, as Plantinga, some 23 years latter admits, “...no philosophical arguments of any consequence meet *that* standard; hence the fact that theistic arguments do not is of less significance than I thought” (Plantinga 2000: 69).

⁶ See Dougherty and Poston (2008: 99-110). See also Unwin (2003) for a guided tour of how to apply Bayesian reasoning to your own views about the evidence for God.

⁷ “...theodicies, as we might call them — seem to me shallow, tepid, and ultimately frivolous...” (Plantinga 1996: 70).

Peter van Inwagen follows suit (with early Plantinga) when discussing theodicy, traditionally seen as a branch of natural theology.⁸ He, too, sets forth a standard of success in psychological terms:

An argument for p is a success just in the case that it can be used, under ideal circumstances, to convert an audience of ideal agnostics (agnostics with respect to p) to belief in p — in the presence of an ideal opponent of belief in p (van Inwagen 2006: 47).

For this to have any real meaning, it must be reduced to non-psychological terms.⁹ The ideality of the agnostic must be reduced to some kind of basic epistemic concepts. So then perhaps van Inwagen's jury of ideal agnostics is drained of any psychological aspect and is just a cipher for those standards that underwrite or describe the epistemic ideal of an argument. Perhaps, but we don't think so, for the ideal is still the ideal for *persuasion* of an agent who holds to those ideas.

In his own forays into natural theology,¹⁰ Plantinga has sometimes claimed that natural theological arguments have some force to at least establish the *permissibility* of theistic belief¹¹ and can be of helpful consequence.¹² That doesn't exactly put the 'R' in 'RPNT', but it's a start, and it illustrates something important, something that Swinburne does make quite explicit: the power of cumulative case arguments. Swinburne in fact claims very little indeed for all his natural theological arguments, officially, anyway. The way *The Existence of God* is structured, all Swinburne officially claims is that for all the theistic arguments prior to consideration of religious experience, they make theism more likely than not.¹³ Then, the force of religious experience works like this. He argues for a principle according to which if someone claims to experience something, and there are no good reasons to doubt them, and the thing claimed is not all that improbable, then we should conclude

⁸ To see why theodicy must be a kind of natural theology, see Dougherty (2014: 51-55).

⁹ See Feldman (1995: 147-169).

¹⁰ See, Plantinga (1967: chapters 2 and 3); and Plantinga (1974: chapter 10). See also, Dougherty and Walls (forthcoming).

¹¹ See Plantinga (1974: 221); and (2000: 131).

¹² See Plantinga (2001: 348-49).

¹³ Of course, on the book's concluding page, Swinburne writes that "An argument from all the evidence considered in this book to the existence of God is a good P-inductive argument" (2000: 342), an argument for the probable truth of theism. Consequently, one can rationally believe theism based on the natural theological arguments he presents. However, remember that the argument is one of probability, not deductive certainty. Moreover, the evidence and its persuasive power is relative to the individual.

they probably experienced the thing in question. All that natural theology serves to do is to satisfy the “not too improbable” clause in the principle of acceptance of experience reports. Of course there is much more to be said about the veracity of religious experience reports. Our purpose here is just to show that you can’t paint natural theology with a broad brush concerning its aims. Natural theologians stake claims for a vast array of territory across the probability spectrum. They may well think that at times if someone isn’t persuaded, the reasons don’t have to do with the force of their arguments. But *everyone* who makes an argument for a conclusion not universally accepted has to think that, so we’re stuck with that. Which brings us to the next section.

2.4 Natural Theology and Disagreement

If you make an argument that persuades you and not someone else, one of you is in error. Which of you it is may be hard to figure out at times. So long as one conciliates somewhat, there’s nothing prideful in continuing to hold one’s view.¹⁴ And notice that disagreement among practitioners of natural theology can, as in other fields, actually increase one’s rightful confidence in the conclusion. So consider the diversity of arguments for God’s existence. People’s methodological differences influence which arguments they proffer. Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Kant¹⁵ all have very different arguments for theism and important variations among what is concluded from them. However, it would be absurd to conclude from this that the lesson of natural theology is that one should claim much for it on pain of epistemic pride. On the contrary, the fact that so many people of such diverse cultures, times, and methodologies all think that there must be something supernatural “at the back of it all” is very good evidence that they are on to something, that there is some kind of being with a kind of fundamentality to it “holding the whole thing up.” They all seem to be responding quite naturally¹⁶ to something in nature or human nature.¹⁷ Trying to work out the best expression of this natural response is

¹⁴ For a fully general account of the epistemology of disagreement, see Dougherty (2013: 218–238).

¹⁵ Even Kant had an argument for God’s existence. See Kant (1979).

¹⁶ For the naturalness of theistic belief, see Evans (2010), and Barrett (2004).

¹⁷ Think of something somewhat broader than Kant’s “starry heavens above me and the moral law within me” (Kant 1998: 161–2).

the philosopher's way of explicating an extremely widely shared intuition that the limitedness or contingency or what have you of nature calls out for supernatural grounding. Disagreement about the precise explication is trivial compared to the impressiveness of the consensus concerning the intuition that drives the research project. Neither the affirmation of the broad consensus nor the attempts to provide a philosophically precise explication are rightly considered prideful. Yet that is at the base of RPNT. A broad term for the phenomena that evoke natural theological reflections is "natural revelation." To that topic we now turn.

III. YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVELATION

What is natural theology? As we have characterized it in broadly Thomistic grounds, natural theology is reflection about God that uses as material for reflection items of general revelation. What's general revelation? General revelation is distinguished from special revelation. What's special about special revelation? It wouldn't be far from the truth to say that natural/general revelation consists in the information conveyed about God through the natural world and human nature and that special revelation is anything else. It's easier to state within a religious tradition than it is to give a general characterization. In most forms of evangelical Protestantism, special revelation consists in the Bible — conceived of without the deuterocanonical books, the so-called "apocrypha" — and nothing else. Other forms accept the words of certain prophets as containing special revelation concerning God. Judaism recognizes a subset of the Christian bible as sacred scripture. Islam has the Koran. Catholics have the Bible — including the deuterocanonical books — and both the ordinary and extraordinary magisterium. On some interpretations, these other groups have non-scriptural magisteria as well, and for most of them the revelation consists more primitively in the words of the prophets than in the record of those words.¹⁸ Here is roughly the breakdown that Saint Thomas gives at the beginning of the *Summa Theologiæ* (Ia.1).

¹⁸ Some forms of evangelical Protestantism actually give priority to the record over that which was being recorded as the revelation.

3.1 *By Reason Alone?*

One characterization of natural theology is that it is achieved “by reason alone.” However, it should be understood that “by reason alone” must be tied to “with special revelation.” This is because all knowledge of God is via God’s self-revelation. And God has chosen to reveal himself in different ways. Aquinas speaks of “the natural light of reason” (*ST* IIa-IIæ 4.8, ad 3) and Aristotle says, “God kindled our reason to be a lamp within our soul” (*Rhetoric* 1411b). Reason is the organ of evidence, which when used rightly works in harmony with our affective and volitional aspects. It is that by which we perceive something as evidence in general and as evidencing something in particular.

Of course, reason is a gift from God and as such is itself a witness to God. Reason is “tinged with the divine” in that reason reflects the divine and does not fit into a naturalistic universe.¹⁹ In this sense, there is no such thing as “neutral reason.” The mere existence of reason is evidence for the existence of God. The same is true of consciousness, which is antecedent to knowledge, and so too for theology, philosophy, and the natural sciences.²⁰ Furthermore, had God withheld granting certain conceptual abilities, we wouldn’t be able to reason to our own existence, much less his. All knowledge is grace — God’s activity to bring about effects we cannot do so on our own. All knowledge of God is a great grace. Nevertheless, given that God *has* granted certain conceptual abilities and that he *has* made a world that contains objects which point to or aid in draw those who are willing toward him (all created objects point to a creator, but some contexts make it more clear than others), natural theology is a fitting extension of natural revelation.

3.2 *The Width and Breadth of Natural Theology*

Our conception of RPNT is characteristically broad. Natural theology tracks general revelation. The range of evidence is far beyond the phenomena at work in the cosmological, teleological, and ontological arguments. In the *Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, Charles Taliaferro notes, “philosophical arguments about the evidential value of religious experience now are treated in

¹⁹ See Lewis (1978: chaps 3-6); Reppert (2003); and (2009: 344-90); Hasker (1999: 64-74); Plantinga (1993: chapter 12); and (2000: 227-40, 281-84, 350-51).

²⁰ See Moreland (2008), and Swinburne (2013).

the domain of natural theology” (2009: 18). Moser’s characterization of natural theology is far too thin, picking out only a portion of what natural theologians are up to.

If we take seriously what John Coe calls “pneumetological realism”²¹ — that we can gain knowledge of and about God and life in his kingdom by observing God’s activity in human history and our own life — then such a project falls under the category of general revelation and by extension natural theology. For example, Proverbs contains examples of empirical observations that can be known apart from special revelation, in nature (6:6, 30:24–28) and in human life (24:30–34, 30:21–23). We might think of much of Augustine’s *Confessions* as providing evidence of God’s activity in human life that we can test ourselves. Dallas Willard embraced the Pascalian notion that we could come to know the truth of Christianity by testing the teachings of Jesus in everyday life. He writes,

To come to know him [Jesus] and to clarify who he really is, people have only to stand for what he stood for, as best they can, and to do so by inviting him to take their life into his life and walk with them. If they do just this with humility and openness — which everyone knows to be his manner of life — they will know him more and more as they take his life to be their life (Willard 2009: 147).

Elsewhere, Willard argues that analyzing the logical form of argument used by Jesus as presented in the Gospel’s can give us good evidence to take him seriously as one who might very well know what he is talking about, which helps strengthen our confidence in him.²² Understood in the full sense, general revelation includes the evidence available in the practice of spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, and prolonged self-examination. Such a life of discipleship attends to the general revelation of one’s life, which aids in producing knowledge.²³ As we’ll see later, this is closely akin to Moser’s account of “personifying evidence,” so it turns out that Moser himself might be a practitioner of RPNT.²⁴

Often these inferences are based on intuitive notions of something like the principle of sufficient reason. We think this is plausible to understand

²¹ See Coe (2009).

²² See Willard (1999: 605–614).

²³ See Porter (2008: 134–38). For the spiritual aid natural theology can provide in discipleship, see Porter (2007: 189–202).

²⁴ This would not be the first time Moser’s own actions were less radical than he’d hoped. See Dougherty’s review of *Sever God* in *Marginalia Review* (Dougherty 2014c).

the argument given by Paul with Barnabus in Acts 14. Their audience sees them as gods. Paul acts to remove this obstacle by arguing that they are not a sufficient cause of the universe, only the God they are speaking of can bring the universe into existence (14:15).²⁵ Similarly, in Acts 17: 22-31 Paul makes great use of the natural theology of the Greeks, who worship “an unknown God.” Paul does not dismiss their natural theology as failing to establish the existence of the specifically Christian God, as Moser does (more on this below). Rather, Paul builds upon the evidence they already have.²⁶ Revelation, general or special, is always from God. If it is used in a complex argument, commonsense inference, or simply seeing things as the revelation of God, it is *all* a response to God’s self-revelation.

Understood this way RPNT recognizes the universe and human experience as soaked with non-coercive evidence of God’s reality and activity.²⁷ This is not arrogant, although rejecting this might very well be. Consider H. R. Mackintosh, whom Moser is fond of quoting.

It looks very devout to argue that God is so great, so sublime, so ineffable that He is utterly beyond the reach of human apprehension, but the doctrine has implication very often overlooked. It limits the power of God in a preposterous degree. For obviously it implies that God cannot reveal Himself to man, cannot get through to the human spirit; and this is quite incredible if the God we believe in is real and wise and loving (Mackintosh 1929: 40).

²⁵ Although he does not make the same philosophical observation we do, New Testament scholar, Craig Keener, in his recent tome on Acts explains the apologetic nature of Paul’s speech in Acts 14:15, noting that Paul omits direct quotations of Scripture because of his audience. Keener draws correlations to the thought of Paul in Acts 4 and 17 as well as his epistles which show a pattern of natural theological argument about God from nature (Rom. 1:20) with implications concerning idolatry (1:25). See, Keener (2013 vol. 2: 22157-2168).

²⁶ Regarding the relation of Paul’s speech to natural theology, Craig Keener explains, “Also, despite arguments to the contrary...many scholars contend that Paul’s natural theology in Rom. 1:18-32 is compatible with that in Acts 14:15-17 and here [Acts 17:22-31]. When the discussion of natural theology in each passage amounts to less than a paragraph, the fact that both the Lukean Paul and the epistolary Paul employ natural theology is far more striking than arguments from silence about which motifs present in one are absent in the other. . .Indeed the given range of diverse arguments concerning natural theology in antiquity, it is the parallels that appear most significant...” (Keener: 2013, vol. 3: 2620-2621).

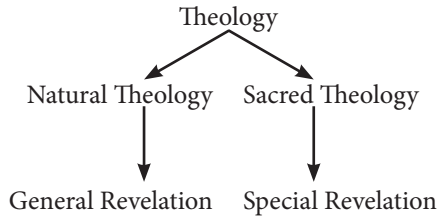
²⁷ This of course does not deny that there might be coercive evidence of God made available in certain kinds of direct encounters with God, for example. Theoretically, for one who saw certain propositional evidence, then the evidence could in some sense be coercive.

This at least highlights the tension between God's transcendence and his eminence. It is not at all clear that Moser is able to maintain this balance. Conversely, it doesn't seem difficult for the natural theologian to maintain this balance. So long as they realize that just as all truth is God's truth, all revelation is God's revelation.

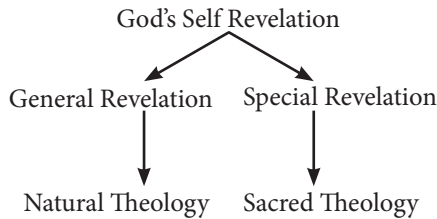
Since, on our view *all knowledge of God is via revelation*, there is no such thing as revelation apart from God. This point seems lost on Moser when he states, "I break rank with most friends of natural theology, because I do not see how the created world by itself is evidence for a personal God worthy of worship" (Moser 2012: 310). Unfortunately, Moser merely implicates natural theologians in general. So we are left wondering if there are advocates of RPNT who are accurately portrayed by Moser.

Moser does not use the terms "theological" knowledge or "philosophical" knowledge. But they are apt because any philosopher *qua human* has access to general revelation (Rom. 1:20). For example, Plato had so much to say about God that coincided with the Christian tradition that the Neo-Pythagorean Numenius of Apamea (quoted in Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* I.22.150.4) exclaimed, "For what is Plato, but Moses speaking in Attic Greek?" And Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, bk. Lambda) has an interesting doctrine that bears important resemblances to Saint Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity. Indeed, *theologikê* is used in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and rightly translated "theology." Nevertheless, at this stage in history, "theological" connotes work in a confessional tradition, but it is important to note the lines of continuity between the natural theology of the pre-revelatory and extra-revelatory communities and confessional Christian theology. To "other" someone's reflections on God, based on their acquaintance with God's self-revelation in nature or human nature, because they don't appeal to one's own holy books is just theological chauvinism.

The standard scholastic diagram for the main divisions in theology is as follows.



Here theology breaks down into distinct species and their starting points. With the points we have made above in mind, consider what happens when we turn the above diagram on its head.



This diagram nicely depicts our thesis that all theological knowledge is grounded in God's gracious self-disclosure.

IV. MOSER-EVIDENCE

What is Moser's alternative picture? At the base of his picture is the notion of "filial knowledge" (2010: 209-216). There's no knowledge without evidence of some sort, and the key kind of evidence for Moser is "personifying evidence" (2010:36-40). Moser calls the kind of evidence that RPNT works with "spectator evidence" and asserts that it "makes no demand or call on the direction of a human will or life..." (2010: 37). We argue that personifying evidence and spectator evidence reduce to the same kind of evidence used across the disciplines. Moreover, this distinction, which motivates his rejection of RPNT, devalues the role of prevenient grace. So, while Moser's notion of personifying evidence is reducible, those features that are distinct render his view problematic.

4.1 *Of Evidence in General, the Non-Neutrality of Our Rational Capacity*

Given the importance of evidence to this inquiry, it is well that we say a few things about evidence as such. Two upshots will be that, first, whatever Moser's notion of evidence, it will be a species of evidence that is continuous in important ways with evidence on any other topic, and, second, that our most basic rational capacities themselves are the result of God's guiding hand.

First, consider the various kinds of evidence one might have for any given proposition. Our typical sources of evidence are the five senses each of which have quite different modalities of introspection, memory, testimony, and insight. Via the senses we gain sensory evidence about the external world as it is now²⁸; via introspection we gain introspective evidence about the current contents of our own minds; via memory we gain memorial evidence about the way the world appeared to us in the past; via testimony we gain testimonial evidence about the way the world is outside our direct observational abilities; via rational insight we gain what philosophers sometimes call "a priori" evidence ("from before" or "apart from" experience) about truths in abstract matters like mathematics, logic, fundamental metaphysics, *et al.*²⁹

Sometimes in the natural sciences we refer to "empirical" or "experimental" evidence. This is a complex of the primitive forms of evidence just canvassed. We see a needle on a meter move to a certain point; we remember seeing the needle move to a different spot at a past time when there were different inputs, etc. Testimonial and memorial evidence is also of course reducible to sensory and *a priori* evidence. We hear certain sounds when people speak to us, and then we break that down into informational components; we respond to visual cues we have learned to or are hard wired to associate with trustworthiness or untrustworthiness, etc.

What the basic kinds of evidence have in common is that each source of evidence gives to certain propositions in its own way what Locke called the "evident luster"; a "clarity and brightness to the attentive mind."³⁰ The most basic kind of

²⁸ Or as it was very, very, very recently, given the slight delay in transfer of signal.

²⁹ We need not detain ourselves here with the so-called "synthetic *a priori*."

³⁰ The Locke reference is from Earl Conee (1998: 849). Conee (1998) ridicules Locke as does Plantinga (1993: 191). Both later seem to do an about face. See Conee (2012); Conee (2013). Plantinga sensibly recognizes this category as "impulsional evidence" (Plantinga 1996).

evidence is a phenomenal quality a proposition has in virtue of “lighting up” as true, in virtue of which we are attracted to it.³¹ At rock bottom, we’ve got nothing else to go on. Our evidence is, most generally, what we have to go on in forming beliefs. At the foundation of our evidential structure is some kind of phenomenal conservatism³² which we distill into the following principle.

Reasons Commonsensism (RC): If it seems to *s* that *p*, then *S* thereby has some reason (in proportion to the seeming) for *p*.

This generative principle, stating a sufficient, not necessary, condition, is compatible with both internalism and externalism about justification or knowledge. It is also perfectly general, applying to all disciplines and capturing the reasons-giving features of each sources of justification (perceptual seemings, rational seemings, memorial seemings, introspective seemings). So evidence in the humanities — evidence that some text has some author, say, or that some passage has some meaning — evidence in the hard sciences, soft sciences, evidence in religion, etc., all come down to this. Or so the natural theologian may reasonably hold.³³ So if Moser’s “personifying evidence” is evidence, it’s ultimately reducible to the same kind of evidence used across the disciplines. This calls into question Moser’s heavy reliance on the distinction between personifying evidence and spectator evidence in two ways (which we don’t have room to develop fully here). First, it shows that in the end, his distinction isn’t so radical, because all evidence ends up working the same way. Second, it threatens the very distinction as he makes it, because all evidence as characterized here — in line with that of leading natural theologians like Richard Swinburne — is normative. All evidence ultimately consists in experiences with assertoric force, experiences that assert that the world is a certain way, which therefore put normative pressure on us to accept their claims. No evidence is mere spectator evidence. When, in general revelation,

³¹ See Feldman (2004), for a nice, careful explication of some of the important features of this story.

³² See Conee (2004: 15-21), Heumer (2001), and Tucker (2010).

³³ Most notably in the present context, this is held by preeminent natural theologian Richard Swinburne. See Swinburne (2001). About Swinburne’s natural theology, Alvin Plantinga has said, “Here the most prominent contemporary spokesperson would be Richard Swinburne, whose work over the last 30 years or so has resulted in the most powerful, complete and sophisticated development of natural theology the world has so far seen” (Plantinga: 2014).

“the heavens pour forth speech,” to those lacking any special revelation, this is also God’s call. The specificity of content in either general revelation or special revelation occurs along a spectrum, whereas Moser’s distinction is black and white.

What evidence we have depends on what our conceptual repertoire is. Two men are standing in front of a tree. One is an arboreal expert the other is arboreally ignorant. The arboreal expert recognizes it as an elm. The arboreally ignorant does not. It clearly appears to be an elm to the expert, not so to the ignoramus. The evidence isn’t the light-waves reflecting off the tree and forming an image on their retinas (an image we can stipulate to be qualitatively identical). The evidence consists in a conceptually-enriched post-optical experience in the mind wherein to the expert, the experience causes it to seem to be an elm, but not to the ignoramus.

What is my evidence that my wife loves me? What is my evidence that this sentence is grammatical? It’s hard to identify. We can spend no more words on a general theory of evidence, but suffice it to say that whatever evidence one might *come up with* after careful reflection, the evidence that actually justifies at the time is simply the sense that it is so, an ability to *tell* or *recognize*. For example, grammaticality generally comes down to rules, rules the subject who can habitually identify grammaticality has internalized, but the subject need not be able to state or even readily recognize such rules. Nevertheless, one’s acquaintance with such rules allows one to reliably discern — based simply on the feel of the sentence — whether or not a sentence is grammatical. This is reasons commonsensism at work. We are rational animals, but we are rational *animals*, and God has built us to recognize truth instinctually. There is no compelling reason to think naturalistic evolution would provide this reliability, this link-up between our epistemic instincts and reality.³⁴ At the very base of our rational capabilities, in a perfectly general way, is the grace of God. And as we have been at some pains to demonstrate, this is so even on a standard evidentialist epistemology³⁵ assumed by key natural theologians.

³⁴ See footnote 22 and 23.

³⁵ Note here that “evidence” does not mean “argument” as it often does when used by Plantinga. For more on this see Dougherty and Tweedt (2015).

4.2 *Talk about Your Hidden God!*

Could there be a world with no revelation whatsoever? Technically no, as we've used "revelation" above for encoded information about God. To see why there couldn't be a world in which there was literally no revelation in this sense, consider that any contingent being provides a premise in the contingency argument for a necessary being, the rest being *a priori*. Thus any world at all will encode information about God. Of course, even a world with no contingent beings, only God himself, clearly encodes information about God. But what really matters for our purposes is not what information is encoded but what we can make of it. And that's a matter of how we are constituted, which is up to God.

God could give us evidence — impulsional evidence — that he exists under any circumstances. Imagine a world in which you don't have the usual sources of evidence. You have no senses, in particular. Thus, you have no testimony — at least not any human testimony as we ordinarily conceive it, but we'll return to that shortly. You have no or very little memory — as little as needed for the scenario we are painting to be metaphysically possible. You also have next to nothing by way of rational insight or even introspection. In particular, you don't form many beliefs about abstract matters or about the contents of your own mind because you get very little information about them (again, as little as possible to make my scenario metaphysically possible). This is a bit of a bleak existence, similar to being asleep all the time or in a sort of trance.

A very contemplative individual might reflect upon their existence and its nature. They might notice that they change and that anything that changes must be contingent. They might see that universal contingency is absurd and thus infer that there must be a necessary being. So even in this extremely epistemically pared down situation, someone *with the right conceptual abilities* could engage in RPNT. But what conceptual abilities we have is up to God. He decides in deciding what to create what kinds of creatures there will be, what kinds of capacities they have. A baby has, in a way, more evidence than we do in the above thought experiment, yet they don't reason to the existence of a necessary being! If God wanted to create creatures who didn't know anything about him, it would have been easy for him to do. All he had

to do was to restrict our cognitive abilities or conceptual resources in the right way. So, as we've been arguing, all knowledge of God is not only by way of revelation, it is by way of gift, grace. Revelation is an act of the revealer to the subject of the revelation, just as in the testimony of the Holy Spirit.³⁶

4.3 *Personifying Evidence*

Moser explains his notion of “personifying evidence” of God as having the following distinctive character:

...this evidence becomes salient to inquirers as they, themselves, responsively and willingly become evidence of God's reality, in willingly receiving and reflecting God's powerful moral character — specifically divine, unselfish love for others, even one's enemies (Moser 2010: 2).

This is not exactly a clear notion of evidence. Is “evidence” in the quotation personifying evidence or propositional evidence? If the former, then it's deeply flawed, because then it appeals to the very notion it purports to explicate. If Moser means the latter, then propositional evidence is appropriate proximate evidence for God, since it is the operative evidence according to what he says.

Moser offers a definition of “the transformative gift” as:

one's being authoritatively convicted in conscience and forgiven by *X* of sin and thereby being authoritatively called into volitional fellowship with *X* in perfect love and into rightful worship toward *X* as worthy of worship and, on that basis, transformed by *X* from default tendencies to selfishness and despair to a new volitional center with a default position of unselfish love, including forgiveness, toward all people and of hope in the triumph of good over evil by *X* (Moser 2010: 200).

What Moser seems to fail to appreciate is that being “transformed from tendencies to selfishness and despair to a new volitional center tending to unselfish love” can be a process of prevenient grace. It is something that in most cases happens by degrees and that happens, at least in part, prior to “getting saved.” That is, prior to someone recognizing in any clear way God's “authoritative call” or enters into ways of “rightful worship” of God, they can, by God's grace, begin to undergo this transformation, and, indeed, sometimes undergo it to a considerable degree, even more so than some people who *do*

³⁶ See Dougherty (2014b: 97-123).

explicitly recognize God's authoritative call! That is, Moser seems to ignore the doctrine of *prevenient grace*. Prevenient grace, as the name implies, comes before effectual grace, and is based neither on knowledge of special revelation nor any explicit knowledge of God at all. God supports this pre-salvation transformation via a myriad of natural means. Seen this way, God's preparatory action in prevenient grace is of a piece with the idea of general revelation. In an imperfect but telling analogy, we say that natural theology is to sacred theology what prevenient grace is to saving grace (at least as the latter normally occurs). Like prevenient grace, natural theology — based on natural revelation — comes before and paves the way, for some, at least, for God's authoritative call contained preeminently in Sacred Scripture. Philosophy is, again, the handmaid of theology; a humble servant of an exalted Queen, yet in virtue of that service, in a way (extrinsically) exalted.

4.4 Epistemic Humility Once More

Some who see RPNT as opposed to epistemic humility suffer from serious misconceptions about the *aims* of natural theology. Natural theology has many uses for both believers and unbelievers alike. Here are two examples of the benefits for believers. Aquinas uses the conclusions of his natural theological arguments as the basis for teaching believers about the *nature* of God in a way that increases our appreciation of God's majesty and otherness. Christian apologists can assuage doubts believers might have due to atheological arguments, or even equip believers to be unmoved by them. But both of these have their appropriate correlates for unbelievers. Notice first that belief and unbelief form a spectrum for firm and fervent belief to "new atheist" style contempt and false certainty. In between are most people. Consider the set of people who occupy the segment of the spectrum clearly below adherence but also lacking anything like contempt or false certainty. They, too, may be interested in what Christians' conception of God is (perhaps more than some Christians!). They, too, may occupy a space between wonder and worry about atheological arguments. Therefore, they, too, deserve the care and attention of natural theologians.³⁷ For purposes of illustration, let us focus on a subclass

³⁷ See Rickabaugh and McAlister (forthcoming).

of the last case as an example: non-antagonistic agnostics who have been the subjects of attempted proselytization by atheists (whether “new” or old).

We take it that a very significant proportion of natural theology is aimed at this audience or one quite similar. Is addressing such individuals’ concerns by appeal to general revelation an affront to intellectual humility? Paul Moser seems to think so.

Here is the real danger of natural theology: it leaves us, from the standpoint of redemption, in an optional intellectual sideshow, without pointing us to (the salient evidence for) the redemptive moral character of the God worthy of worship (Moser 2013: 124).

The danger arises, says Moser, since

Given only *de dicto* evidence, one will lack evidence for the God worthy of worship, even if one has evidence for the god of deism or the god of the philosophers. It’s no surprise, then, that the contemporary debates over the arguments of natural theology rarely, if ever, get around to the crucial redemptive features to be expected of a God worthy of worship (Moser 2013: 124).

But this is wondrous strange. What’s true is that the conception of God in the Judeo-Christian tradition is richer than the “god of the philosophers.” That is, the list of properties of the being generally concluded to exist from theistic arguments or even the richer theology of Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* (especially book Lambda) and in Plato (Book X of the *Laws* and elsewhere) is a subset (approximately) of the set of properties enumerated by, say, Aquinas as he is elaborating on the western religious tradition. It’s also true that part of the compliment set consists in a set of “redemptive features.” Alas, Aristotle thought that God was too much removed from us to play any really redemptive role (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VIII). But, allowing for some reasonable variation, the features of God discernable from nature (Rom. 1:20) are a *subset* of the features that make God clearly worthy of worship and the agent of our redemption. So let us divide the set of God’s properties (bracketing the doctrine of divine simplicity) into the redemptive features and the non-redemptive features. Let R_1 , R_2 , R_3 , etc., refer to individual “redemptive features”³⁸ (technically propositions asserting that God has these features)

³⁸ Why the scare quotes? Here’s why. Moser seems to treat “redemptive feature” as a monadic predicate expressing a simple property when in reality it is surely some kind of relation and thus not part of the intrinsic nature of God at all, as Moser repeatedly seems to assume.

,and let the R_i all be conjoined to form the conjunction R . Let N_1, N_2, N_3 , etc. refer to God's "non-redemptive features." Let the N_i all be conjoined to form the conjunction N . Then the proposition that the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition exists can be represented by the conjunctive proposition $N \& R$ (allowing for grammatical slippage).

Now, again, we must keep in mind the humble purpose of most natural theology: defense of $N \& R$ against atheological arguments for those troubled by such arguments. For $N \& R$ to be true, N must be true. $N \& R$ can't be true unless N is true. Thus defense of N is in service of $N \& R$. Philosophy, that is, is the handmaid of theology. It is a humble role but one glorified by that which it is in the service of. To be even a floor sweeper at the King's castle is an exalted position, not to be distained or deprecated. Moreover, it is uncharitable to presume those who involved in such work end the conversation at N . RPNT is best practiced in a community and over an extended period of this that is aimed at bringing others into a personal encounter with God. Moser seems to assume that natural theology necessarily rejects the significance of volition in knowing God. But why think that is the case?

The sad fact is in this day and age many people, whether raised religious or not, are subjected to a widespread secular ideology that causes them to have the impression that $\sim R$ is well supported by evidence the intelligentsia are in position of. This is a barrier to accepting $N \& R$ (2 Cor. 10:3-5). Strangely, Moser seems to even find this simple function somehow untoward.

Many philosophers of religion worry that some kind of natural theological argument is needed *prior* to a person's willingness to consider receiving a direct volitional challenge from God. In this perspective, God would have to rely on some kind of natural theological argument to challenge beliefs unfriendly to endorsing and cooperating with God's existence (Moser 2013: 124).

Moser goes on to greatly disdain this idea and provide a counter example to it, as though he is revealing some fundamental flaw in RPNT. It is telling that he offers no citation of any examples after "Many philosophers." In fact, we suspect that exactly *no* philosophers think this, and we certainly challenge Moser to find a *single* one who does. The problem is with the phrases "needed" and "have to." It's blindingly obvious that there's no *logical* necessity here, and it's hard to see some weaker form of necessity that could make the claim even *prima facie* plausible. Consider this thesis:

Natural Theology Necessity Thesis: God *must* use natural theology to remove intellectual barriers to belief.

We assert that no natural theologian has ever asserted this in print with a strong modality. Moser is free to enlighten us. At any rate, even if someone somewhere has held this outrageous view, no major natural theologian has, and it certainly isn't a necessary component of appropriate, humble RPNT.

CONCLUSION

We have offered a number of arguments against Moser's claim that the robust practice of natural theology reeks of epistemic pride. We've argued that all knowledge of God is grounded in revelation from God and that natural theology, as it is grounded in general revelation should be conceived of quite broadly. Hence, RPNT is in itself a humble response to God's self-revelation. We've also argued that the means by which Moser rejects RPNT as arrogant, his distinction between personifying evidence and spectator evidence, suffers significant problems. His distinction isn't so radical, because all evidence ends up working the same way. Second, it threatens the very distinction as he makes it, because all evidence ultimately consists in experiences with assertoric force, which therefore put normative pressure on us to accept their claims. No evidence is mere spectator evidence. Moreover, this distinction devalues the role of prevenient grace.³⁹

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³⁹ Thanks for helpful comments and suggestions to Tedla Woldeyohannes, Rose Brugger, and Sheki Lafanzio.

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