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# Natural Theology in Context: A Rejoinder to Moser

Tedla G. Woldeyohannes  
Department of Philosophy  
St. Louis University  
St. Louis, Missouri

**Abstract:** By using “God” as a title for a morally perfect God worthy of worship, Paul K. Moser, argues that arguments of natural theology fail to provide adequate evidence for such a God. He contends that based on a best available evidence the Christian God is a true God, a morally perfect God worthy of worship. He claims that evidence from natural theology is inadequate for the Christian God. In this rejoinder, I contend that since it is not the purpose of arguments of natural theology to provide evidence for the Christian God as a morally perfect God worthy of worship, to reject theistic arguments for their alleged failure to show the existence of a morally perfect God worthy of worship is mistaken. I argue that distinguishing relevant evidence for the Christian God as a Creator from a relevant evidence for God as a Redeemer who is morally perfect and worthy of worship escapes Moser’s objections against the inadequacy of arguments of natural theology.

## 1. On the God Worthy of Worship

It is important to note a crucial methodology that underwrites Moser’s religious epistemology. Moser proposes that the term “God” be used as a title for “a *preeminent, maximally honorific title* that requires of its holder (a) inherent worthiness of worship and of full life commitment and thus (b) self-sufficient authoritative and moral perfection and (c) a perfectly loving character toward all persons, even toward enemies.”<sup>1</sup> Moser suggests that this titleholder, “God,” need not actually exist. The rationale for this suggestion is to avoid question-begging against skeptics, atheists, and agnostics.

Furthermore, Moser remarks, “The term ‘God’ has been used to signify everyone from the mythical Zeus of Greece to the ravenous Thor of Scandinavia to the wretched Jim Jones of Guyana to the righteously gracious

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge UP, 2008), p. 86.

Yahweh of Israel.”<sup>2</sup> One would wonder whether this “God,” the titleholder, whose actual existence has not yet been acknowledged in order to avoid question-begging against the detractors of God’s existence, does actually exist and whether this “God” is the God of Christianity. Moser provides an answer to the question whether “God,” the titleholder, actually exists and whether this “God” is the God of Christianity. He writes: “Scanning world history with due care and openness, we find that an initially plausible candidate for the role of perfectly authoritative and compassionate God is Yahweh, the God of Jewish and Christian theism and the avowed Father of that disturbing Galilean Jewish outcast, Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>3</sup> One would now wonder on what grounds Moser identifies “God,” the titleholder, with the God of Christianity.

Moser’s methodology that underwrites identification of “God,” the titleholder, with the God of Christianity is *abductive*, that is, “an inference to a best available undefeated explanation of our whole range of evidence found in our experience and other evidence.”<sup>4</sup> Moser’s methodology for seeking relevant evidence for the existence of a personal God worthy of worship commits him to the kind of evidence that humans should expect of a personal God worthy of worship that has *apparently* been provided in Christianity. Moser’s methodology plays a key role in his account of religious epistemology. His rejection of the traditional arguments of natural theology is crucially based on his claim that arguments of natural theology do not yield, as a conclusion, a personal God worthy of worship.<sup>5</sup>

In various publications, Moser provides an account of evidence for a personal God worthy of worship.<sup>6</sup> He, then, goes on to claim that since the evidence of the traditional natural theology fails to yield evidence for a personal God worthy of worship, the arguments of natural theology fail. Now it has to be noted that Moser’s account of evidence *is actually* about the Christian God and the redemptive evidence from the Christian God. The redemptive evidence, properly understood, is volition-sensitive in the sense that it is volition-involving such that a human agent who has *willingly* received such evidence would volitionally yield to God. Since, according to Moser, evidence

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See Moser’s “Rejoinder to Angus Menuge on Ramified Personalized Natural Theology,” p. 5, available on the website of the Evangelical Philosophical Society: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=131> . Also, see Moser’s reply to my paper, “How Not to Defend Natural Theology: A Reply” (Available here: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=204>).

<sup>6</sup> See Moser, *The Evidence for God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined* (Cambridge UP, 2010).

of the traditional natural theology is insensitive to the human will, and is exclusively propositional, with a minimal requirement of assent to the proposition that God exists, such evidence is inadequate for a personal God worthy of worship.

It is crucial to understand this: Moser sets up the requirement for evidence/knowledge of a morally perfect God worthy of worship such that by the standard he proposes to be a requirement for sufficient evidence/knowledge of God, the arguments of natural theology fail to deliver that required evidence/knowledge of God. He infers from this that the traditional arguments of natural theology fail.<sup>7</sup> But this inference need not follow if there is a more plausible way to provide an account of evidence/knowledge of the Christian God. Recall that Moser is committed to the idea that the best available evidence supports the claim that the Christian God is morally perfect and worthy of worship. I contend that there is a more plausible account for evidence/knowledge of the Christian God. It is important to note that evidence of natural theology is intended to provide sufficient evidence for God as a creator without implying that that sufficient evidence for God as a creator is also a sufficient evidence for God as a redeemer. Sufficient evidence for God as a redeemer is distinct because it is redemptive and volition-involving and such redemptive evidence is provided by God for willing human beings. Whether the Christian God is morally perfect

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<sup>7</sup> Though not entirely similar this requirement suggests something like the requirement atheists or skeptics usually put for theists about arguments (evidence) for God's existence: The arguments are required to meet a rather strict demonstration [proof] of the existence of God. Moser rightly rejects such a requirement from atheists and skeptics because of the inappropriateness of the demand. (See Moser, *The Elusive God*, p. 38). God's existence need not involve a "proof" in the manner that is a proper requirement for math or logic. One key reason: Evidence for God's existence, especially redemptive evidence, is volition-involving and as such it cannot be reduced to the required "proofs." Having said that, it is important to note that it is no coincidence, *strategically speaking*, that Moser favorably refers to the works of atheist philosophers to make a case that arguments of natural theology fail. Note his reference to Eliot Sober in his, "How Not to Defend Natural Theology" (Available here: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=204>), footnote 11. Also, see his reference to *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, Michael Martin, ed., (Cambridge University Press, 2007) in his, "Rejoinder to Angus Menuge's Ramified Personalized Natural Theology" (Available here: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=184>), p. 2, footnote 4. Interestingly, Moser rightly finds fault when atheists demand theists for a demonstration ("proof") of God's existence, but then he finds an ally in the atheists' rejection of arguments of natural theology. A natural theologian would point out to Moser that since arguments of natural theology are adequate for the goal of natural theology, as I argue below, there is no need to endorse the rejection of theistic arguments by atheists and skeptics.

and worthy of worship can be known by special revelation from such a God and Christianity teaches that that is the case for the Christian God. On the other hand, Moser's reason for proposing moral perfection for God as a requirement for worthiness of worship is unclear. Since worthiness of worship, among other attributes, plays a crucial role in motivating Moser's argument for God's existence, for the existence of an actual God as opposed to a mere titleholder, Moser needs to provide an independent argument that does not presuppose the attributes of the Christian God.<sup>8</sup>

Now it is interesting to think about the Christian God in light of Moser's account of religious knowledge. The Bible contains special divine revelation for the redemptive story of the Christian God, including the Incarnation. This special revelation teaches that human beings possess a *natural* knowledge of God as a creator from the general revelation. According to Christianity, humans can receive redemptive evidence from the same God on the condition that they are *willing* to enter into a volition relationship with God as their redeemer. I contend that Moser's account of religious knowledge emphasizes knowledge of God as a redeemer but fails to provide an account of knowledge of God both as a creator and a redeemer. Since Moser is committed to the view that a best available evidence for a personal God worthy of worship justifies identifying such a God with the Christian God, his account of knowledge of God needs to take into account God both as a creator and a redeemer in a robust way.

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<sup>8</sup> To propose that moral perfection is a requirement for worthiness of worship for a morally perfect God and identifying, based on evidence, "God" with the God of Christianity is not different than what natural theologians also do. That is, natural theologians claim that we can arrive at *some* divine attributes by human reason alone and then special divine revelation confirms that those divine attributes are also revealed in the special divine revelation. Moser's proposal about "God" that "God" is morally perfect and worthy of worship, and based on evidence identifying "God" with the Christian God sounds like the same strategy natural theologians employ. Therefore, at the foundational level, Moser's strategy on which his religious epistemology is based is not different than the strategy employed by natural theologians. But there is one key difference between these two ways of thinking about knowledge of God: Moser does not tell us on what basis he attributes some core divine attributes to "God." It seems that he smuggles in divine attributes from the Bible to describe "God," the titleholder, and then goes on to identify "God" with the God of Christianity, of course, based on a best available evidence. See Moser, *The Elusive God*, p.22. A similar challenge has been issued to Moser's proposal regarding moral perfection as a condition for worthiness of worship in Moser's religious epistemology; see Harold Netland's contribution to Moser's religious epistemology in *Philosophia Christi* (Vol.14, No. 2, 2012), especially pp. 300-301.

In my view, arguments of natural theology are explicit and reflective formulations of the natural knowledge of God the Apostle Paul teaches in Romans 1. I do not hold the view that Romans 1 presents an argument of natural theology. I contend that theistic arguments of natural theology are reflective formulations of the natural knowledge of God taught in Romans.<sup>9</sup> Moser writes in his reply to my paper, “Not even Romans 1... offers an argument of natural theology. In particular, Paul does not infer a conclusion about God’s existence from premises limited to natural knowledge; so, Paul does not offer an argument of natural theology.” I agree. But the Apostle Paul nowhere teaches that we should not formulate the natural knowledge of God in the form of theistic arguments of natural theology. As I argued elsewhere<sup>10</sup>, there was no need for the Apostle Paul (and other biblical writers) to use arguments of natural theology, given the context in which the Gospel was presented, taught, and defended by the biblical writers. More on this below.

It is important to remember that for Moser, among other attributes, moral perfection of God is a necessary condition for worthiness of worship. Insofar as the Christian God is concerned, God as a creator also is worthy of worship. That is, in virtue of being a creator God is worthy of worship. Accordingly, Revelation 4:11 reads, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they are created and have their being.”<sup>11</sup> Revelation 14: 7 reads, “Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.” These verses teach that God as creator is worthy of worship. In my view, since God qua creator is God qua redeemer, given Christianity, Moser’s focus mostly on God as redeemer fails to accommodate other attributes of the Christian God—God as a creator as well. Moser does not often make use of the distinction-- God as creator and redeemer-- which in my view plays some crucial role in an account of knowledge of the Christian God. Importantly, in my view, the relevant evidence for God as creator is distinct from the relevant evidence for God as redeemer and failure to make this distinction leads to some avoidable confusions. Consistent with the teachings of Christianity, the

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<sup>9</sup> I develop this view in more detail elsewhere in, “Must Christian Philosophy Be Directly About Christ? A Reply to Richard Davis.” Available here: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=131>.

<sup>10</sup> “Given the Evidence, Natural Theology is Here to Stay.” Available here: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=203>.

<sup>11</sup> Though this particular text refers to Jesus Christ it does not make much difference to the point I am making. Among other places Colossians 1:15-17 makes another reference to Jesus and his relation to creation. Also see Nehemiah 9:6 a text that teaches that God as creator rightly receives worship.

evidence for the natural knowledge of God is distinct from the evidence that is redemptively efficacious. Accordingly, an account of knowledge of the Christian God must accommodate relevant evidence for God as creator and redeemer.

An account of religious knowledge needs to take into account God's relation to creation and the role of general revelation as a source of natural knowledge of the Creator. Consequently, the project of natural theology is an intellectual enterprise that focuses on what can be known about the Creator from the creation, apart from special divine revelation.<sup>12</sup> Insofar as the goal and value of natural theology is clear, I think, there is no reason to reject it from a field of human intellectual inquiry. But Moser, unsurprisingly, holds a different view, about natural theology. In a *Philosophia Christi* essay on Moser's religious epistemology he writes,

Many philosophers shrug off the message [of Christianity] as seriously misguided or at best undecidable. In contrast, many others tighten their belts and launch natural theology...One easily can relate to this urge, *qua* philosopher..., but it may be premature and dangerous. I submit that it is indeed.<sup>13</sup>

I submit that a clear understanding of the goal of natural theology would not lead to Moser's judgment about the project of natural theology. In the next section I discuss the goal of natural theology and the role of theistic arguments as evidence for God as creator.

## 2. God *qua* Creator and the Goal of Natural Theology

In my view, religious knowledge, particularly about the Christian God, need not begin with a constraint on the traditional arguments of natural theology unlike Moser's view of religious knowledge. However, like Moser, I suggest that an account of religious knowledge can be developed that allows humans to expect the kind of evidence a personal God worthy of worship would provide for human beings who seek relevant evidence for God's existence. In seeking the relevant evidence one can take the abductive route like

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<sup>12</sup> For an insightful argument regarding what can be known about God from creation according to Romans 1, see Richard Brian Davis and Paul Franks, "What Place, then, for Rational Apologetics?" in *Loving God with Your Mind: Essays in Honor of J.P. Moreland* (Moody Publishers, 2014), forthcoming.

<sup>13</sup> "Natural Theology and the Evidence for God," *Philosophia Christi*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2012), p, 307.

Moser and can suggest that if there is a God who created this universe and who is good and loving, and if God intends for human agents to enter into a personal fellowship with God, we should expect such a God to provide relevant evidence for God as creator and redeemer. Contrary to Moser's advice to natural theologians, there is nothing wrong with expecting some evidence for a creator that all human beings can have access to. It does not follow from this that such evidence for God as creator is sufficient for redemption, but then it can be sufficient for human beings to be able to arrive at a conclusion about the transcendent reality. A Christian practitioner of natural theology can rightly engage in just such a project. That is exactly what the project of natural theology is about. That is, the goal of natural theology is to provide an account of knowledge of God as creator and as such the relevant evidence is available for human beings, both believers and non-believers. The method of arriving at knowledge of God as creator and redeemer can and should be pluralistic.

Typically, arguments of natural theology are intended to show that God exists, i.e., God as a Creator, a transcendent reality, exists. I am not claiming that practitioners of natural theology always make this distinction: evidence for God as a creator vs., evidence for God as a redeemer. But I take it that this distinction is implicit. To show that God is a redeemer who is also morally perfect and worthy of worship is not the goal of traditional arguments of natural theology. Moser's objections to natural theology can succeed only if the goal of natural theology is to show that a morally perfect God worthy of worship exists *and* it is the case that the arguments of natural theology fail to yield such a God as their conclusion.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, the goal of the traditional natural theology is limited, and if it is successful, establishing the existence of God *qua* creator is sufficient.<sup>15</sup> Moser disagrees. He writes, "TW's proposed goal for natural theology "to establish that God *qua* Creator exists" is unduly narrow for the range of arguments of

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<sup>14</sup> In *The Evidence for God*, Moser writes, "In any case, to establish the existence of God, properly speaking, the arguments [of natural theology] need to establish the existence of a *personal agent who is worthy of worship* and is thus morally perfect and hence perfectly loving toward all persons," p. 152. [Italics in the original]. Contrary to Moser's claim, no natural theologian would agree with Moser regarding what arguments of natural theology allegedly *need* to establish. What Moser demands arguments of natural theology to establish is *not* what arguments of natural theology are *actually* intended to establish. For a slightly different yet insightful response to Moser's challenge to the adequacy of arguments of natural theology, see Richard Brian Davis and Paul Franks, note 12.

<sup>15</sup> See "Must Christian Philosophy be About Christ? A Reply to Richard Davis" (Available here: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=180>) and "Given the Evidence: Natural Theology is Here to Stay" (Available here: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=203>).

natural theology. Design and moral arguments for God's existence, for instance, need not establish that "God *qua* Creator exists."<sup>16</sup> He goes on to add, "A design argument can focus on (accounting for) the apparent design in the world and allow a different argument to account for the *origin* of what (for instance, the material stuff that) exhibits apparent design."<sup>17</sup> A practitioner of natural theology who makes *cumulative case arguments for God's existence* aims at showing the existence of God with different attributes, who is responsible for the creation of the world. It is important to note that a natural theologian's task is to reflectively construct philosophical arguments from various features of the created order and the concept of God to the existence and nature of God. If and when successful, philosophical arguments for God's existence jointly establish that God exists.<sup>18</sup> Remember that the goal of natural theology is confined to showing the existence of God as a transcendent reality-- and that is what I mean by God *qua* creator -- whose existence and intentional exercise of causal power *explains* the existence of the world or contingent reality. What Moser says, elsewhere, is much similar to the point I have just made. He writes, "Acknowledgment of the existence of God as creator and sustainer of the material world could figure crucially in a best available undefeated explanation of (a) why there is a material world rather than no such world at all and (b) why there is the present law-governed material world, hospitable to some extent to the emergence of human persons, rather than a significantly different world."<sup>19</sup> I do not see a significant difference in the content of what natural theologians claim about God as a creator and what Moser says about God as a creator except for different approaches to make the case for God's existence. Moser favors abductive argument whereas most natural theologians are more pluralistic with respect to arguments for God's existence.

In his reply to my paper, Moser denies that he recommends doing away with natural theology and claims that he even offers an argument of natural theology, though a clearly distinct one. He writes, "Contrary to TW's claim, I have not recommended "doing away with natural theology," given that I myself

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<sup>16</sup> See Moser, "How Not to Defend Natural Theology: A Reply," p. 5. Available here: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=204>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> For a wide ranging arguments of natural theology, see *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, William L. Craig and J.P. Moreland, editors (Blackwell Publishing, 2009). Also, see "Natural Theology and the Uses of Argument," by Timothy McGrew and John Depoe in the forthcoming winter issue of *Philosophia Christi*. For a cumulative case argument, see Doug Geivett's "David Hume and a Cumulative Case Argument" in *In Defense of Natural Theology*, ed. James Sennett and Douglass Groothuis (IVP, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Moser, *The Elusive God*, p. 88

(as we shall see) have proposed a distinctive first-person perspective argument of natural theology.”<sup>20</sup> One would wonder how Moser’s argument counts as an argument of natural theology.<sup>21</sup> I think there is a clue as to what Moser means when he says that his argument is “a distinctive first-person perspective argument of natural theology.” In a *Philosophia Christi* symposium on Moser’s religious epistemology Moser writes,

*The Evidence for God* uses talk of “natural theology” in a restricted manner, to concern (and to challenge) the traditional philosophical arguments for God, particularly, cosmological, teleological, and ontological arguments. I do not, however, include in natural theology all cases for God from religious experience; in fact, the book offers one such case, if a neglected case from salient interventions of agape in human experience. Romans 5:5 summarizes the book’s account, because it offers the experienced

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<sup>20</sup> In his book, *The Evidence for God* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), Moser writes, “My case against natural theology relies on an understanding of the title “God” in terms of a personal agent worthy of worship.” (p.162). He also adds, “Someone might wonder this case itself is a variation on natural theology. Actually, it is not because it does not offer, on the basis of natural sources of knowledge, an inference to the existence of a supernatural being.” (Ibid). “My case,” Moser adds, “relies on a notion of God, as a personal agent worthy of worship, but this notion does not figure in the argument for God’s existence from natural sources of information. As a result, we do not need to rely on natural theology to challenge natural theology.” (pp. 162-163). Though Moser claims that “. . .we do not need to rely on natural theology to challenge natural theology” one would be puzzled what Moser means by that since he is obviously challenging natural theology. One charitable way of understanding what Moser means is this: He is challenging *natural theology of the traditional variety* from a vantage viewpoint of his *distinctive first-person perspective argument of natural theology*. Even so, one inevitable question for Moser is this: On what basis is his argument an argument of natural theology? Below I develop a series of objections to Moser’s claim that his argument, despite its distinctive feature, is an argument of natural theology.

<sup>21</sup> Here is Moser’s argument, i.e., volitional-transformation argument (VTA), for God’s existence:

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. (See, *The Evidence for God*, p.200).

pouring out of divine agape in receptive human persons as the cognitive foundation for hope and faith in God.<sup>22</sup>

Is Moser's argument for God's existence an argument of natural theology, even when it is inherently from a first-person perspective? I do not think so for the following reasons. *First*, it is crucial to note that generally and traditionally the project of natural theology is an enterprise the chief purpose of which is to construct rational arguments for the existence and nature of God by human reason alone, without relying on special divine revelation. In other words, theistic arguments of natural theology are reflective formulations and articulations of the natural knowledge of God. Suppose that we take it that Moser's argument for God's existence is an unpacking, or an explicit formulation of the experiential reality of divine *agape* as Romans 5:5 states. This supposition is in light of the significance of Romans 5:5 for Moser's religious epistemology. Can we now say that Moser's argument for God's existence, the locus for which is Romans 5:5, is neutral with respect to the special divine revelation? That does not seem to be the case. Romans 5:5 reads, "And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." Whereas natural knowledge suggested by Romans 1 is one thing both believers and non-believers are said to possess in common, what Romans 5:5 states can hardly be said to be the case that both believers and non-believers share this experience of divine agape.

*Second*, suppose that a human agent experiences the outpouring of divine agape into one's heart, which Romans 5:5 reports, and from this experience infers that God exists. This seems to meet Moser's condition for redemptive evidence being received by a human agent that is irreducibly from a first-person perspective. Now what can one say about Moser's argument for God's existence, is it an argument of natural theology? One thing that is clear about the human agent who is experiencing the outpouring of divine-agape is this: Romans 5:5 is not talking about a person's initial coming to belief in God. This, Romans 5:5, experience is part of a process of redemption; consequently, this experience cannot be a basis for an argument of natural theology.<sup>23</sup> An

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<sup>22</sup> Moser, "Natural Theology and the Evidence for God," *Philosophia Christi*, Vol. 14., November 2, 2012, p. 307.

<sup>23</sup> Or, consider a person who encounters God's loving demands in the Gethsemane experience and from this infers that God exists. One could, then, object to this (argument from religious experience) by saying that the "encounter" is part of the process of redemption and therefore not a basis for an argument of natural theology. I thank Bill

argument of natural theology, when successful, is supposed to provide evidence to support an initial coming to belief in God. But for a person who is already experiencing a process of redemption, through the experience of divine-agape, the basis of this redemptive process need not be an argument of natural theology. Hence, Moser's claim that his argument is an argument of natural theology, albeit its distinctive first-person perspective, fails.

*Third*, let us consider this argument. Either VTA is an argument of natural theology or it is not. Suppose that it is. If it is, then it must have features of arguments of natural theology such that *it has to be accessible to rational people and it must be a philosophical argument arrived at by reason alone*. But VTA inherently involves a first-person perspective and hence the evidence that constitutes it is inaccessible to other rational agents. The supposition is that VTA is an argument of natural theology, but we arrived at a conclusion that VTA lacks an essential feature of arguments of natural theology. Therefore, contrary to Moser's claim, VTA is not an argument of natural theology.<sup>24</sup>

*Fourth*, it is to be noted that arguments of natural theology are typically construed to establish God's existence by pure reason alone. But VTA's distinct feature, according to Moser, is the claim that it is volition-involving while the traditional arguments of natural theology are not. Hence, for VTA to be genuinely an instance of an argument of natural theology, it is required to establish God's existence by pure reason alone, but that is exactly what VTA is against. Therefore, for VTA to be an example of an argument of natural theology it must abandon its distinctive claim that it is distinctly volition-involving. Therefore, contrary to Moser's claim, VTA is not a distinctive argument of natural theology.

In response to my concern whether his argument for God's existence is "cogent for a wide audience, including shrewd agnostics," Moser claims that his argument "differs from the familiar arguments of natural theology, which are intended to rest on evidence readily available to all capable inquirers. So, I have not offered an argument that is intended to satisfy the second clause of the criterion in question [the requirement for cogency]." I think this response fails for the following reason: Moser's argument, VTA, insofar as evaluation of an argument for its cogency is concerned, I suggest that it is readily available for all capable inquirers in the same way arguments of natural theology are readily

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Hasker for suggesting this objection to Moser's claim that his argument is an argument of natural theology.

<sup>24</sup> Since Moser did not provide a different meaning to what "natural theology" is, except for the addition of distinctiveness of his version of an argument of natural theology, his argument is not an argument of natural theology. His argument can be an argument of natural theology only if he *equivocates* the meaning of natural theology.

available. Those who examine its cogency would go about examining it in the same way they would examine cogency of theistic arguments.<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere, Moser writes, "... a proposition for which one argues must rest on an argument, but we should not confuse either evidence or propositions supported by evidence with propositions for which one argues."<sup>26</sup> In the context of this discussion, a proposition Moser argues for, "God exists," i.e., the conclusion of VTA, "must rest on an argument," as Moser himself claims since "God exists" is a proposition. However, it is to be noted that obviously God is not a proposition nor does it follow that evidence for God's existence consists only in propositions. Adequate evidence for God's existence can be *de re*, i.e., essentially non-propositional.<sup>27</sup> A philosophical argument once formulated and presented cannot escape philosophical scrutiny. Hence its cogency can readily be debated as it is being debated. At any rate, one would want to know if VTA is not intended to meet the requirement of cogency what purpose the argument is supposed to serve.

In this connection one would like to know which argument of natural theology Moser takes to be a good argument for God's existence. It has to be noted that Moser recommends doing away with "all of the *bad arguments* of natural theology" (italics in the original), apparently with the exception of VTA, which he considers a distinctive argument of natural theology. At this point one cannot help wondering whether there is only *one good argument* for God's existence, a personal God worthy of worship, to be exact, viz., VTA. But there is a problem for recommending VTA as the only good argument of natural theology since I have already cast doubt on the claim that VTA is an example of natural theology. Therefore, for reasons presented above, Moser's argument for God's existence is neither a distinctive argument of natural theology, nor is it the only good argument of natural theology.

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<sup>25</sup> In my paper, "Given the Evidence," I was infelicitous when I said this: "This argument [VTA] essentially involves a person's will and hence it is robustly volition-involving, which is not a feature for arguments of natural theology." To say the kind of evidence Moser argues for, which is not identical to the argument itself, is volition-involving, as evidence *de re*, does not apply to the argument, VTA, since VTA as an example of an argument for God's existence consists in propositions—that is an essential feature of all arguments. All arguments are propositional; they are essentially *de dicto*, including VTA insofar as it is an argument. If Moser denies that it is an argument one would want to know what it is. Obviously, Moser would not deny VTA is an argument since he calls it an argument, albeit a distinct one.

<sup>26</sup> See Moser, *The Evidence for God*, p.150.

<sup>27</sup> I am in agreement with Moser that redemptive evidence is volition-involving and hence *de re*. But then, in my view, propositional evidence, evidence *de dicto* of natural theology is sufficient for the existence of God as creator.

### 3. Natural Theology in Context

As I argued elsewhere,<sup>28</sup> when presenting, teaching, and defending the Gospel context plays a significant role. To make this point concrete I suggested that the context of the biblical writers was similar to the context in most of contemporary Africa. I suggested that theistic arguments are of little or no use in a context where there is no denial of the existence of God, which is the case in most of Africa. The reason we do not find much use of theistic arguments of natural theology in the Bible, I suggested, is for the same reason, i.e., there was no need for Jesus and the Apostle Paul and other biblical writers to use theistic arguments when most of their audience was not in denial of the existence of God. Moser's recommendation to reject natural theology, despite his qualification of which arguments of natural theology he rejects, is partly based on his claim that since Jesus, the Apostle Paul and other biblical writers did not use arguments of natural theology we should not use them either.

Moser thinks the analogy I suggested between the two contexts, the African and the context of the biblical writers, is bad. He writes,

We know from the New Testament that many of the first-century disciples of Jesus ministered in the Jewish diaspora, including in centers of Greek and Roman culture and thought, such as Athens, Corinth, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Colossae, and Philippi. TW's analogy suggests that these disciples did not encounter skeptics about the existence of God. This suggestion, however, is altogether implausible, and appears to be motivated only by his desire to try to explain the absence of arguments of natural theology in the New Testament. He suggests that everyone in the audiences of the disciples already believed that God exists, and therefore that the arguments of natural theology would be superfluous.<sup>29</sup>

This is not quite correct. Moser suggests that disciples or biblical writers were exposed to philosophical arguments, but they did not use them. But where is the evidence for this claim? What kind of theistic arguments were in circulation in those times with which the disciples were familiar? Moser did not give us the evidence. It is important to note that I did not claim that the

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<sup>28</sup> See "Moser's Christ-Centered Metaphilosophy" (Available here: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=164>), and "Given the Evidence, Natural Theology is Here to Stay" (Available here: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=203>).

<sup>29</sup> Moser, "How Not to Defend Natural Theology," p. 3

disciples were familiar with theistic arguments the same way Western trained missionaries, who minister in contemporary Africa, are exposed to theistic arguments. Even for those Western missionaries, who are familiar with theistic arguments, there is no use for theistic arguments in most of the African context. Even if we grant, for the sake of argument, that the audience for the disciples was exposed to skepticism we do not find skepticism about the existence of God being the major concern for most of the biblical writers. If skepticism about God's existence was even one of the major issues, we could have seen biblical writers addressing the skeptical audience in the writings in a way that suggests that skepticism about God's existence was such an issue.

If the Apostle Paul was seriously concerned with resistance to the Gospel due to philosophical arguments in the form of skepticism about God's existence, why did he not devote even a short letter to such a skeptical audience? It is important to note that as anyone who is familiar with the nature and purpose of New Testament letters can tell, the letters were *occasional* or *situational*. That means, they were meant to address specific issues that the writers intended to deal with. If philosophical skepticism about God's existence was such a major issue for the biblical writers, it is plausible to expect that at least one of the letters would have been on skepticism or atheism or agnosticism. The absence of such a letter among the New Testament writings can plausibly be explained by the absence of the need to address philosophical skepticism about God's existence.<sup>30</sup> Whether the biblical writers were familiar with theistic arguments or not, being familiar with theistic arguments does not require using such arguments in every context.

Moser adds,

The apostle Paul, undeniably, was a highly effective leader in the earliest Christian mission to the Gentiles. According to Acts 17:18, he conversed with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens. The Epicureans were atomic materialists, in the spirit of Democritus, and therefore were not theists in any manner akin to Jewish or Christian theism. We may assume, then, that some of the philosophers encountered by Paul in Athens were atheists, for all practical purposes. He does not respond to them with arguments of natural theology, even though neither the Epicureans nor the Stoics acknowledged the creation of the world by a transcendent God. So, if TW is right about the arguments of natural theology as yielding knowledge of God as creator, Paul should have

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<sup>30</sup> It is crucial to avoid reading into the New Testament writings our own experiences and expectations.

taken the opportunity to correct the Epicureans and Stoics by means of arguments of natural theology. There was a genuine need for correction, as Paul well knew, but he avoids using any argument of natural theology. I submit, then, that Paul, like Jesus and his other earliest disciples, was not an advocate of arguments of natural theology.<sup>31</sup>

It is crucial to bear this in mind: Recall that I do not recommend theistic arguments to be used in every context. Nor do I recommend rejection of theistic arguments in every context. Theistic arguments should be used only when and where there is a need to engage those who ask for reasons why, for example, Christians believe in the existence of God. If the question Christians face is about some Christian views on, say, salvation, a Christian need not plunge into arguments for God's existence. That would be answering a question that was not raised. Now let us look the broader *context* of Acts, before and after Acts 17:8. Acts 17: 16-18 reads,

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup> So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup> A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." (NIV)

Note these two points about the passage: First, the Apostle Paul reasoned with both Jews and *God-fearing Greeks*. This does not suggest that either the Jews or the Greeks were atheists or skeptics about God's existence in the sense of denying the existence of any God. At least, the *prima facie* interpretation of this text does not suggest that the debate was about God's existence. Rather, it is plausible to suggest that the debate was about the object of worship—idols vs. the God of Christianity. Second, the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were reportedly saying that the Apostle Paul was "advocating foreign gods," but for these philosophers to say what they reportedly said seems to imply that the message Paul was preaching was about a God that was foreign to them. But this idea does not seem to imply that these philosophers with whom Paul conversed were skeptical about the existence of any transcendent reality or at least some object of worship. Of course, we can plausibly infer that they were not theists in the Judeo-Christian sense. For

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<sup>31</sup> Moser, "How Not to Defend Natural Theology," p. 3.

“practical purposes,” to claim that the Epicureans and Stoic philosophers were not Judeo-Christian theists is plausible. But to infer from this that the debate between the Apostle Paul and his audience was about God’s existence or non-existence is implausible.

At any rate, what follows the above passage is crucial to understanding the concern of the Apostle Paul regarding his audience. Acts 17:22-23 reads, “Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! *I see that in every way you are very religious.*”<sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.” NIV. [Italics added]. The context of his audience, their views about God and their lack of proper understanding about the object of worship did not call for theistic arguments for God’s existence. Furthermore, it is interesting to point this out. As Ben Witherington remarks, Acts 17:23 “strikes a balance notable throughout this [Areopagus] speech, between making contact with the audience and condemning their idolatry. On the one hand, Paul says that Athenians, in a fashion, worship this unknown God. On the other hand, they do not really know this God...”<sup>32</sup> Witherington adds,

In short, Paul is suggesting here that the Athenians have an inkling that such a God exists, as is shown by their actions, but they do not either really know or properly acknowledge this God. This way of putting it is not much different from what we find in Rom. 1:20-23. Rom. 1:23 shows that instead of proper worship pagans have chosen to honor images or idols resembling humans or animals, just as Paul saw in his tour in Athens.<sup>33</sup>

Consequently, the message Paul’s audience needed was a correct view of God and that is what Paul shared with his audience as follows:

<sup>24</sup>”The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.

<sup>25</sup> And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

<sup>26</sup> From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the

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<sup>32</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (William Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), p. 523.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. <sup>27</sup> God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. <sup>28</sup> 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'" Acts 17:24-8 (NIV).

Two points about this preceding passage: First, it seems clear from the text that Paul saw a need to challenge the views of his audience regarding the true God. He did not have to start with an argument of natural theology when the problem for his audience was that of worshipping a wrong object that is not worthy of worship. It is not the case that Paul's audiences were averse to worshipping anything at all. Second, Paul was making a point of contact with his audience for the sake of communicating his message without totally rejecting some common grounds with his audience. This is a crucial point about the role of context in communicating the Good News. Generally, arguments of natural theology become relevant when one's audience denies the existence of God. In such a context a practitioner of natural theology makes use of theistic arguments as a point of contact with the unbeliever since theistic arguments are explicit formulations of the natural knowledge of God that is shared by believers and non-believers. Michael Sudduth elaborates this idea as follows:

The purpose of such [theistic] arguments in the apologetic encounter is not so much to persuade the unbeliever of what she does not know but to bring to consciousness what she implicitly already knows. The apologist does not attempt to help the unbeliever reach God by way of reason, but rather he attempts to bring clarity to how God has already reached the unbeliever in the unbeliever's own rational and moral constitution.<sup>34</sup>

From the preceding discussion, I take it, that it is plausible to conclude that Jesus and the Apostle Paul and other biblical writers did not have to use arguments of natural theology even if they were familiar with theistic arguments in circulation in their times. Since Moser's recommendation for Christian

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Sudduth, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (Ashgate Publishing, 2009), p. 157.

philosophers is to abandon arguments of natural theology altogether<sup>35</sup> on the grounds that Jesus and the Apostle Paul did not use them, it would be useful if Moser provides a compelling reason why Christian philosophers should abandon arguments of natural theology in *every* context.

Moser suggests that arguments of natural theology are not needed probably in every context if his “positive epistemology” is on the right track. He writes,

TW expresses support for my positive epistemology that accommodates the importance of human volitional inclination in knowledge of God. We should note that if this positive approach is on the right track, we have no need for the dubious arguments of natural theology. Those arguments will then play no crucial role in human knowledge of God.<sup>36</sup>

One can respond to Moser’s suggestion in a couple of ways. First, given the goal of arguments of natural theology, if “knowledge of God” in question is that of knowledge of God as a creator, I have argued above that natural theology can yield such knowledge of God. Second, Moser must abandon the constraint he imposes on the goal of theistic arguments by which he judges that such arguments fail. As I pointed out above, a natural theologian need not agree with Moser that knowledge of God natural theology attempts to produce is knowledge of God as morally perfect and worthy of worship. Once a natural theologian distinguishes evidence for God the creator from evidence for God the redeemer, a natural theologian can reject Moser’s demand for knowledge of a morally perfect God from arguments of natural theology.

Moser quotes Bavinck as an ally in his rejection of natural theology. But it does not seem right that Bavinck’s view is altogether negative regarding natural theology as Moser’s view is. In personal communication, Bill Hasker remarks,

It’s interesting that Herman Bavinck, whom Moser cites as an ally, is much less negative about NT [i.e., natural theology] than Moser himself. He says these arguments “may augment faith,” that they are “the products of faith’s observation of the world,” and that they are “testimonies by which God is able to strengthen already-given faith.” If that much is true, that is abundant reason not to abandon NT! Bavinck

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<sup>35</sup> Probably with an exception of his “first-person perspective argument of natural theology.”

<sup>36</sup> See Moser, “How Not to Defend Natural Theology,” p.11

only wants to insist that NT is not the basic and indispensable reason for a Christian to believe in God, which a proponent of NT can very well grant.

Moser writes that “[s]ome may insist on some role for those arguments [of natural theology],” and he goes on to quote Bavinck to make a point that for Bavinck arguments of natural theology play no crucial role. But, as Hasker points out, even if arguments of natural theology do not play a crucial role, according to Bavinck, they play some or even rather several roles.<sup>37</sup> Also, the role arguments play is person relative; they could play a crucial role for some, but just some role for others. And even no role still for others. *I contend that there is no reason to generalize one universal role of arguments of natural theology for everyone.* I nowhere claimed that everyone needs arguments of natural theology; neither did I claim that no one needs them in one context or another. In this connection, Moser makes the following remark about the role of theistic arguments. He writes, “If Bavinck is on the right track, we can begin to explain why I have never met a logically and philosophically capable inquirer who was convinced that God exists on the basis of the familiar arguments of natural theology.”<sup>38</sup> But it is hard to conclude from this claim that there has never been any person who is “a logically and philosophically capable inquirer” who has been convinced that God exists on the grounds of theistic arguments. Since one needs to do an empirical investigation to confirm or disconfirm this claim I am not convinced that a defense of the role of natural theology needs sociological/empirical evidence. It seems very implausible to me to conclude from one philosopher’s experience (one way or another) the philosophical validity of an account of knowledge of God.<sup>39</sup>

*Finally*, Moser repeatedly claims that my defense of the project of natural theology is lacking in something that is essential for a good defense of natural theology. His challenge is that I should have provided an argument of natural theology to make my defense of the project of natural theology more

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Sudduth, in his *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology*, writes, “Bavinck, Lecerf, Kersten, and Masselink each denies that theistic arguments can prove the existence of God in a rationally compelling manner to the unbeliever. . . . Nevertheless, these thinkers assign to theistic arguments a range of roles from refuting atheism to contributing to knowledge of God that is given in a more direct way in the religious consciousness of the unbeliever,” p. 142.

<sup>38</sup> Moser, “How Not to Defend Natural Theology,” p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> I in no way doubt the sincerity of Moser’s claim. But I find the inference from one’s personal experience to a deficiency in a proposed account of knowledge of God as hardly justifiable.

compelling. Moser writes, “Doubt is definitely appropriate when one advocates the evidential value of “arguments of natural theology” without presenting any such argument for careful assessment. . . . According to this reply, such advocacy must yield to the presentation and assessment of an actual argument of natural theology.”<sup>40</sup> I think it is a mistake to demand a presentation of an argument of natural theology when the focus of my paper is *about* the arguments of natural theology—the goal, value, role, scope of arguments of natural theology. Presentation and assessment of actual arguments is a different project. If there is a need to assess arguments that have already been presented there are numerous places to go to and one of them is *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*.<sup>41</sup> My project is not to add more arguments of natural theology. To clarify the scope and goal of natural theology is a project worth pursuing in its own right and there is no reason to reduce such a project to a presentation and assessment of a particular argument of natural theology. I submit that a failure to properly understand the scope and goal of existing arguments of natural theology adds more confusion to the assessment of already available arguments of natural theology. The publication of *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*<sup>42</sup> is evidence for my claim that a project that aims at understanding and clarifying the goal and scope of natural theology is long overdue.<sup>43</sup>

***Tedla G. Woldeyohannes is a PhD student at St. Louis University, and a coordinator & editor for the Evangelical Philosophical Society’s web-based symposium on Paul Moser’s paper “Christ-Shaped Philosophy.”***

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<sup>40</sup> Moser, “How Not to Defend Natural Theology,” p.1

<sup>41</sup> (Blackwell Publishing, 2009)

<sup>42</sup> Russell Re Manning, et al ed., (Oxford University Press, 2013)

<sup>43</sup> I’d like to thank Bill Hasker for his comments on a previous version of this paper.