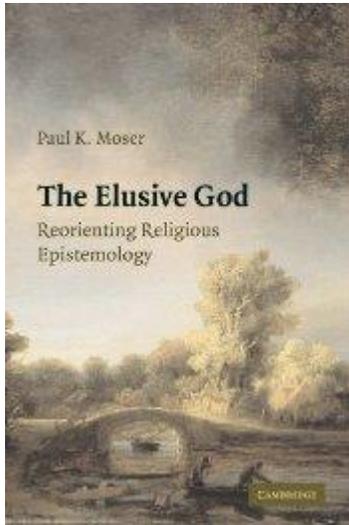


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[Book Review: The Elusive God by Paul K. Moser](#)



[The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology](#) by Paul K.

Moser is a philosophy book dealing the question of religious epistemology (theory of knowledge). It addresses the topic of God's apparent hiddenness or concealment. That is, if God exists, it is not necessarily obvious that He exists. In light of this fact, the book looks at the question of evidence that shows God's existence and examines the type of evidence one should expect from a God that is hidden. This review will survey the primary theme of the book and offer a brief synopsis of some of the secondary themes.

Moser defines the idea of hiddenness: "Let's say that God's existence is concealed, hidden, or *incognito* for a person at a time if and only if at that time God's existence fails to be not only obvious but also *beyond cognitively reasonable doubt* for that person."<sup>1</sup> He cites the *Pensées* in which Pascal says that any religion denying that God's existence is concealed is false. The book seeks to answer, among other things, why God would be concealed. With the tools of philosophy and the confirmation of scripture, the author presents reasons that God's reality would not be coercively obvious to all.

The introduction offers a condensed overview of the book itself, with the author's goals clearly laid out:

The heart of the book's account is that we should expect evidence of divine reality to be *purposively available* to humans, that is, available in a manner, and only in a manner, suitable to divine purposes in self-revelation. The latter purposes ... would mirror God's morally perfect character, and aim non-coercively (that is, in a manner that can be humanly rejected) but authoritatively to transform human purposes to agree with divine purposes. We thus should expect a distinctive kind of authoritative evidence rather than spectator evidence that fails to challenge humans to yield their wills to a perfectly authoritative agent.

For the reader unaccustomed to philosophical terminology, the first few chapters may be hard plodding; but the content offered by the author presents an essential paradigm shift when it comes to religious epistemology. Moser refers to this as a needed reorientation:

The reorienting involves a change of intentional attitudes beyond one's assenting to information. In particular, it primarily involves one's *will*, and not just one's intellect. It mainly concerns what one *intends to be and to do*, and not just what one believes about the world. [...] some cognitive questions about (human knowledge of) God's existence aren't purely intellectual but irreducibly involve matters of the human will.<sup>3</sup>

The point Moser drives home throughout the book is the idea that the person who is seeking to know if God exists needs to reorient his methods in light of the nature of the One whom he is seeking. The question many are asking is: (a) Do we humans know that God exists? But Moser suggests that the question we should be asking is:

(b) *Are we humans known by God* in virtue of (among other things) our *freely and agreeably being willing* (i) to be known by God and thereby (ii) to be transformed toward God's moral character of perfect love as we are willingly led by God in volitional fellowship with God, thereby obediently yielding our wills to God's authoritative call?<sup>4</sup>

The author pushes the question back to the questioner simply because *how* one approaches the question determines the sort of evidence that will be available to the asker. This has to do with who God is. Moser provides a definition:

The otherwise slippery word "God," when used carefully in exchange with skeptics, is a maximally honorific *title*, and not a proper name. It signifies an authoritatively and morally perfect being who is inherently *worthy of worship*, that is, worship as wholehearted adoration, love, and trust.<sup>5</sup>

With this definition in mind, the book not only explores the kind of evidence that should be expected from a morally perfect God, but also the way in which the seeker positions himself to receive such evidence. As Moser puts it: "...an immediate concern is whether *I* am in a good cognitive position to receive purposively available evidence of divine reality. ...we shouldn't remove volitional autobiography from epistemology."<sup>6</sup> That is to say, the *will* of the seeker makes a difference in the search. As for evidence:

The key cognitive issue is: exactly what *kind* of evidence? It seems safe to say that God as morally perfect wouldn't necessarily be bound by the kind of evidence *we humans* happen to prefer. Instead, we should expect to have to conform our cognitive expectations to *God's* preferred evidence. On reflection, we shouldn't be surprised by this cognitive order of priority, given divine supremacy and human inferiority.<sup>7</sup>

If God is real, therefore, he must be sought on his terms. And again, Moser points out that legitimate evidence can be rejected simply because the seeker is unwilling to receive it: "People typically can ignore or disregard available evidence, and sometimes will do so if the evidence challenges them to change the direction of their lives."<sup>8</sup>

The author also points out that, if God exists, God holds the role of authority. In revealing Himself to persons, there comes not only an intellectual assent, but a moral obligation: So, this God shouldn't be expected to come to us with *spectator evidence*, that is, evidence pointing to some truth but *not* demanding that its recipients yield their wills to (the will of) the source of the evidence. This God would have no interest in playing such an intellectual game.<sup>9</sup> Some readers may recoil at Moser's downplay of natural theology, but the author doesn't reject it out of hand; Moser simply puts it in its proper place in light of what he refers to as "purposively available evidence" of divine reality. To clarify:

In our skeptical moments, we may ask: God, are You there at all? Are You truly *with us* at all? If so, why must You be so elusive, often to the extent that You seem nonexistent? Instead, in redemptive love, God would ask us: Are you truly *with Me*, in your *will* as well as in your thought? If we aren't, spectator evidence of God's reality would only domesticate or otherwise devalue God's authoritative reality, because it wouldn't challenge us to submit to God as the Lord of our lives. The providing of such spectator evidence would be akin to what Jesus bluntly called "casting pearls before swine."<sup>10</sup>

According to Moser, natural theology carries with it no authoritative call. It is therefore not a primary means that a perfectly loving God would use to reveal himself. This idea may also explain the possible ambiguity of such evidence from nature. Moser continues to explain what sort of authoritative call God would provide:

A central challenge for us from a perfectly loving God would be an authoritative call to *repent* and to *obey faithfully and wholeheartedly*: that is, to turn our wills, with divine aid, to fully obedient submission to God's unselfish, perfectly loving will that offers a lasting life of fellowship with God.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, Moser points out our position relative to such a God and thus our dependence upon him to reveal himself: "We may need noncoercive cognitive help *from God* in our coming to know God's reality, and we may need to *freely ask* God for such help in light of initial vague glimmers of divine reality."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, if God exists and is willing to reveal himself to those who are willing to obey him, why not ask?

Given that we are completely inferior to God, if God exists, could we reasonably make demands on God in favor of our preferred ways of knowing God's reality? The question seems merely rhetorical, as the answer is obvious. Still, many people proceed as if we have a right to know God's reality on our own preferred terms.<sup>13</sup>

Moser proposes that seeking God independently of a willingness to submit to his authority (should he exist) is equal to cognitive idolatry. He explains: "A prominent kind of cognitive idolatry is *the idolatry of volitionally neutral support*. Such idolatry includes our demanding conclusive evidence of God's existence regardless of the direction of our own will relative to God's will."<sup>14</sup> One can see how God may hide himself from those unwilling to submit to his ultimate authority over their lives, regardless of his offer of redemption. The author suggests that, "Proper seeking of God, accordingly, would involve sincerely inviting and welcoming God with gratitude, on the basis of purposively available authoritative evidence of divine reality."<sup>15</sup>

The remainder of the book deals heavily with the paradigm shift that should come to one's philosophical vocation in light of God's authority in one's life. In particular, Moser discusses two modes of philosophical pursuit: an obedience mode and a discussion mode. The discussion mode is where worldly philosophy spends its time. Moser points out that the Christian philosopher should instead pursue philosophy in an obedience mode. This latter section is an excellent read for those pursuing Christian philosophy.

In conclusion, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* is both a challenging and rewarding read, especially for those interested in epistemology and the themes of divine hiddenness. For the apologist, it suggests a connection between available evidence and the willingness of the heart. Finally, for the Christian philosopher, Moser's challenge to an obedience mode of philosophy is one that should not be ignored.

1 Paul K. Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 1.

2 Ibid., p. x.

3 Ibid., p. 3.

4 Ibid., p. 4.

5 Ibid., p. 18.

6 Ibid., p. 23.

7 Ibid., p. 37.

8 Ibid., p. 40.

9 Ibid., p. 46.

10 Ibid., p. 51.

11 Ibid., p. 53.

12 Ibid., p. 70.

13 Ibid., p. 93.

14 Ibid., p. 103.

15 Ibid., p. 126.

Posted by Brian at [7:30 AM](#)

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