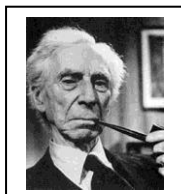




## Does God hide and seek?

### *Reorientating Philosophy of Religion*

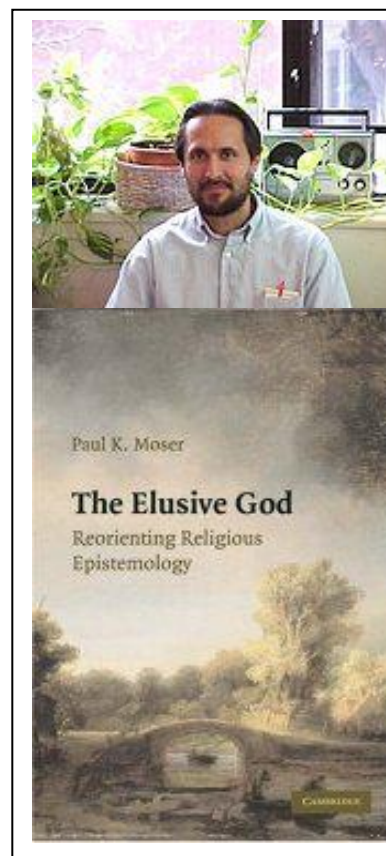
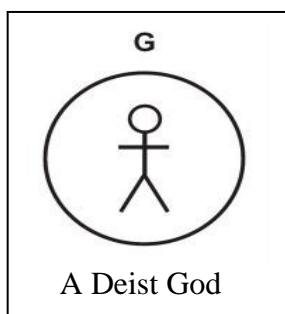
*Do you ever sense that the probabilistic arguments for and against God's existence arrive at a sterile stalemate? Sure, the intellectual sparring may train future lawyers or salespeople to argue their case with one eye on the opposition. Yet what troubles me is not that the jury's out, but that the best religious believers can hope for in this debate is to establish the reasonableness of a god they don't believe in - the god of deism who switched on the universe and then went on holiday. Yet one of the most significant books to have been written in this field in 20 years promises a more fruitful way to engage in the God debate by breaking down the neat lines between theology and philosophy, faith and reason, by moving the goalposts if not the pitch.*



For Professor Paul K. Moser of Loyola University, Chicago, knowledge of God is not a spectator sport. He quotes Bertrand Russell's response when asked what he would say if he his maker after death - "God, you gave us insufficient evidence." Here the assumption is

that God ought to disclose himself unambiguously to the court of human reason and experience. Moser proposes a third way beyond pure rational (as in the a priori ontological argument) or empirical (as in the cosmological, teleological arguments) knowledge of God known as '*volitional knowledge*'. It has long been acknowledged that if successful, the traditional case for the existence of God would result in the impersonal God of *Deism*<sup>i</sup>. If it established the existence of a supreme being, we could only speculate about what character or nature he/she/it/they possessed or what purpose they intended. Crucially in science, as in religion, the terms in which we frame our question or hypotheses

determine the kinds of results open to us. The present terms of our debate assume that God should be publicly available in a non-challenging way to



the *reason* separate from the *will*. The Enlightenment replaces the '*faith seeking understanding*' approach of Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas and Calvin with a method of doubt, and the demand for God to evidence his existence as a rational idea or an impersonal force in nature. This

Moser calls 'cognitive idolatry' because it assumes control of the terms and standards of knowing without regard for the inherent nature of the One to be known.

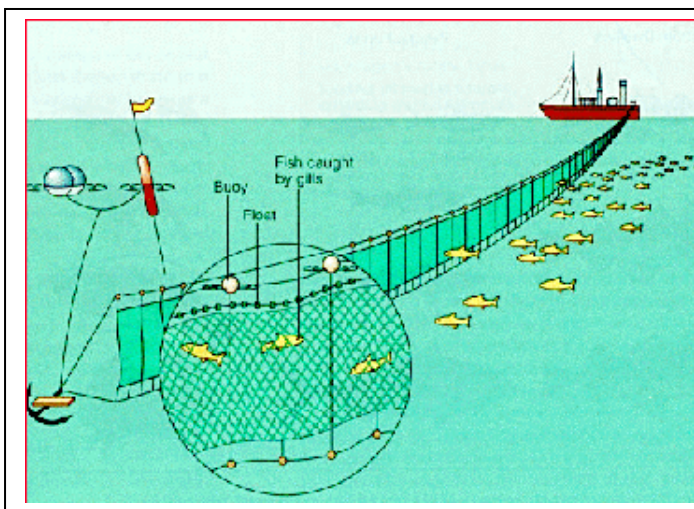
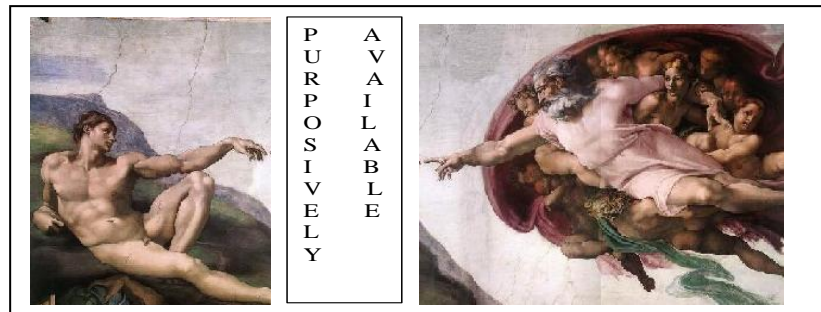
What if it's an I-Thou

encounter with an authoritative Lord who is our maker, judge, and loving father as opposed to the academic question of the I-It idol we put in his place and who offers no serious challenge to our lifestyle? What if, asks Moser, authoritative evidence exists, but is only *purposely available*? Every search for knowledge [properly justified belief] needs to take adequate account of the source of the evidence in question. Classic theism sees God as a personal being who is conscious, has affections, beliefs, intentions, and can act. And as a perfectly just and loving being, he desires a transformative encounter, not a chess game at a safe distance. As Moser puts it, 'The Hebraic God is anything but cognitively safe or controllable.'<sup>iii</sup> In summary, he asserts that 'This book's account of purposely available conclusive evidence and knowledge of divine reality focuses on a distinctive kind of evidence available in experience: evident authoritative divine love expressed via human conscience, including an evident invitation to repentance and volitional fellowship with God.'<sup>iii</sup>

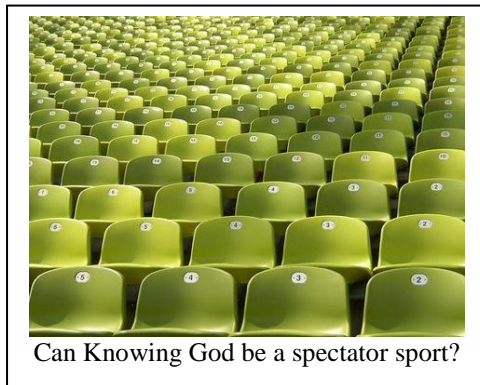
Now for readers of the bible, Anselm, or Pascal, this '*faith seeking understanding*' approach is hardly novel, indeed it is consistent with the character and purposes of God they believe in and claim to know. What's distinctive in Moser's proposal is an explanation as to why evidence of God's existence isn't more transparent. Recognising a long tradition in theology and biblical thought of *Deus Absconditus* or the hiddenness of God, he cites Blaise Pascal's comment that 'any religion denying that God's existence is concealed is false'<sup>iv</sup>. Why then does God hide from the sceptic (and at times from the believer), and yet be willingly found by those who earnestly and obediently seek him? Because he aims 'non-coercively but authoritatively to transform human purposes to agree with divine purposes'.

Consistent with the nature of his moral character and redemptive purposes, a perfectly loving God would to enter into a freely chosen encounter rather than coercing sceptics against their will by making his existence undeniable. In this way, God proves elusive to the sceptic whilst rewarding 'those who earnestly seek him' (Hebrews 11:6). We can no more trawl the ocean with a 40 mile driftnet that has 6 inch holes and declare, when we haul it up, that we can safely assume that there are no fish smaller than 6

inches in the ocean than declare that a personal being be known impersonally or without



regard for his 'primary goal in self-revelation...transformation of recipients towards God's loving character'<sup>v</sup>. The seismic shift Moser is calling for may be seen in his reordering of our questions. He argues the case that I will get a better answer to question (a) 'Do I know that God exists?' if I start with question (b) 'Am I willing to be *known* by God in virtue of being authoritatively challenged by God for the sake of my being transformed towards God's moral character via my being led by God in volitional fellowship?'. Moser pays close attention to the epistemology of the Bible, reminding us that whilst 'The Hebraic God is famous for hiding at times'<sup>vi</sup>, Jesus taught that there is evidence enough for he who has 'ears to hear and eyes to see.'<sup>vii</sup> He quotes verses like, "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call on him while he is near" (Isaiah 55:6); "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me." (Jeremiah 29:13-14), "You have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children"; and "The world did not know God through its wisdom." (1 Corinthians 1:21). God chiefly discloses himself through 'Volitional knowing' as opposed to rational or empirical routes because he 'is after something more...transforming than simple reasonable belief about God.' This is 'filial



Can Knowing God be a spectator sport?

communion and faithful obedience.'<sup>viii</sup> So to discard the possibility that evidence of God's existence is purposively available to those willing to be transformed and obscured to spectators is to assume that the sole responsibility for disclosure in this two way relationship is God's. Yet as Moser comments, 'Spectator evidence of God's reality would ... allow for volitionally casual access to God, with no demand on our wills relative to God's will to call us to repentance and divine-human fellowship. It would thereby neglect God's exalted status as perfectly and thus supremely authoritative for us in

terms of the direction of our wills'<sup>ix</sup>

In explaining the elusiveness of God, Moser addresses the sceptic's mutually exclusive demands that God make his existence unambiguous yet at the same time not over-ride human freewill in the process. God is dismissed as made in the image and imagination of humans, yet if he left no doubt of his existence, he would be charged with coercion. So divine hiding is God's way of lovingly educating people 'toward sacrificial love' and has always been a 'difficult non-coercive business.'<sup>x</sup> Yet if God manifested himself via human conscience, this 'would be humanly suppressible and thus not overwhelmingly powerful' says Moser<sup>xi</sup>, so he reaches out to us noncoercively and has 'us come to know Him in a way that changes our wills for the better.' Equally, 'human suppression of divine evidence could leave salient experiential evidence of its own, including human restlessness (lack of peace), joylessness, selfish fear, and a dearth of unselfish love.'<sup>xii</sup> So we should ask what kind of knowing would be suited to the (hypothetical) God of classic theism? If he is the personal, loving, and authoritative Lord of all creation, then we should expect the relationship he desires with his creatures to be that of a father to his child. Yet this '*filial knowledge*' makes the philosophers of religion in modernity uneasy. For them, knowledge should be obtained objectively and dispassionately, that of God being no exception. Yet we cannot know a holy God without being changed, for as the 17th century philosopher Blaise Pascal puts it, "If there were no obscurity man would not feel his own corruption; if there were no light man would not hope for a cure. Thus it is not only right but useful for us that God should be partly concealed and partly revealed, since it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his own wretchedness without knowing God."<sup>xiii</sup>



In quoting Pascal, who also urged that reason were not the only way we learnt, writing that "The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know. We feel it in a thousand things. It is the heart which experiences God, and not the reason. This, then, is faith: God felt by the heart, not by the reason."<sup>xiv</sup>, there's a sense that the active commitment of *faith seeking understanding* grasps the need for a reorientation of the will to the lordship of a God who is worthy of worship. Here Moser distinguishes between *theoretical theism* and *filial theism*. The former assumes that we can have access to propositional knowledge of God and remain unchanged, for as Aquinas puts it, 'all knowing is produced by an assimilation of the knower to the thing known'. Yet as Moser notes, "the true God may indeed be troublesome rather than convenient by our preferred standards, and may need to be thus, given our dire predicament of destructive selfishness. A God of perfect love, as suggested, would aim to elicit not just new beliefs in us, but also new volitional attitudes, including unselfish intentions and desires."<sup>xv</sup>

Now with all this sermonising about of our wills having gone awry and the need for God's grace and obedience to his will, the sceptic is likely to see a circularity to this position. If you don't find the evidence conclusive, it's because you're not attuned to a God who knows no such thing as honest doubt. Moser terms this the '*no-question begging challenge*', arguing that in the end all justifications in epistemology (e.g. those for sense experience) have a degree of circularity to them, but that this need not be viciously so. But whether you buy his argument or not, it certainly asks you to consider whether your assumption that there ought to be '*spectator evidence*' conforming to your expectations of God as a non-personal object as opposed to a personal agent, is well founded. Would a (hypothetical) personal, authoritative, loving and just being choose to disclose himself non-purposively or so unambiguously that it became coercive? Furthermore, for religious believers (in Moser's case, as a Christian, but I think the argument works for classical theism generally), it results in the God who, though he be elusive, possesses a moral character worthy of worship.

Kant was right that arguments for God's existence fail to offer conclusive evidence. Yet as Moser puts it, 'truth indicators that constitute evidence need not be arguments.'<sup>xvi</sup> The kind of evidence Moser has in mind is "evidence demanding that we yield our wills to (the will of) the divine source of the evidence in question". In fact few believers have come to faith through the formal philosophical arguments for God's existence. Moser's alternative is to reorientate the God debate around the likely character and purposes of its hypothetical subject. If the God of classical theism exists, he is personal, having affections, beliefs, intellect, a will, aims and intentions. It is consistent with the nature of a personal God to make himself purposely available in direct interpersonal relationships to those whose wills are open to him. As a benevolent deity, he would act non-coercively, receding from human selfishness whilst manifesting his presence to those whose wills were attuned by their conscience and the call of his Spirit to be obedient to him. He would be certainly have an aversion to being domesticated in armchair philosophy of religion discussions. If God exists, Moser suggests that our will, motives, conscience, and motivations are as important as our reason in finding, or being found by him.

Whenever I make this argument I'm told that it ain't gonna convince any sceptic out there as it represents a refusal to accept their burden of proof and play fair. Yet the assumption in modernity is that knowledge is mastery. By contrast (and as any relationship will evidence over time), personal knowledge takes us out of our detached, objective mode: it can't be kept at arms length so easily. In discarding statements that constitute volitional knowledge such as 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'<sup>xvii</sup> or 'all right knowledge of God is born of obedience'<sup>xviii</sup>, we may be blocking off routes to our enquiry after the divine. This was the case for the once sceptic C.S.Lewis who in describing his own philosophical search, writes "when the line pulls at your hand, when something breathes beside you in the darkness... It is

always shocking to meet life where we thought we were alone... There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion ("Man's search for God"!) suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to *that!*"<sup>xix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> e.g. see Pascal, *Pensees*, Section VIII, 556, 'They imagine that it consists simply in the worship of a God considered as great, powerful, and eternal; which is strictly deism, almost as far removed from the Christian religion as atheism, which is its exact opposite. And thence they conclude that this religion is not true, because they do not see that all things concur to the establishment of this point, that God does not manifest Himself to men with all the evidence which He could show. But let them conclude what they will against deism, they will conclude nothing against the Christian religion...'

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.luc.edu/faculty/pmoser/idolanon/GodMoreObvious.pdf>  
Paul Moser Monograph Pdf (PMM) , p24

<sup>iii</sup> TEG, p8

<sup>iv</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, 275

<sup>v</sup> PMM, p12

<sup>vi</sup> PMM, p3 e.g. Psalm 10 "Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble ?" or Isaiah 45:15, 'Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.' Divine hiddenness can have a range of aims aside from judgement - to encourage human focus, longing, and appreciation of divine presence.

<sup>vii</sup> Mark 4:9

<sup>viii</sup> MM p5

<sup>ix</sup> The Elusive God, C.U.P., 2008, p56 (TEG)

<sup>x</sup> PMM, p12

<sup>xi</sup> TEG, p8

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid. The introduction to TEG is available at ...

<http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780511402265&ss=exc>

<sup>xiii</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, 446. <http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=jakUTlIF9G0C&pg=PA139>

<sup>xiv</sup> Pascal, *Pensees*.

<sup>xv</sup> TEG, pp14,15

<sup>xvi</sup> TEG, p244

<sup>xvii</sup> Proverbs 1:7; 111:10

<sup>xviii</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes*, I.vi.2.

<sup>xix</sup> *From Miracles*, C.S.Lewis