

## Book Reviews

MOSER, PAUL K. *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xii+292 pp. \$90.00 (cloth).

Paul K. Moser issues a jeremiad against the cognitive idolatry of skeptical epistemologists of religion in *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology*. The author seeks to interpret a classic theological position on human knowledge of God in contemporary philosophical terms. He then deploys this interpretation to criticize the evidential standards stated or implied by critics of Christian theism. In particular, he targets the view that the absence of some types of evidence for God's existence, or, alternatively, the problem of divine "elusiveness" or "hiddenness," recommends religious agnosticism. The book offers a worthwhile and interesting contribution to the ongoing debate about this problem and also traces the implications of its epistemological position for the method and subject matter of philosophy. Its homiletic tone may exasperate those who hope for a more traditional philosophical or theological style, but Moser aims to write the book in a way that is consistent with his own methodological prescriptions. In what follows, I focus on Moser's epistemology of religion and its application to contemporary agnosticism rather than on his proposals for a reoriented Christian philosophical method or his somewhat technical (and only tenuously relevant) treatment of epistemic circularity in the appendix.

According to the theological epistemology Moser presents, many people can and do have experiential evidence sufficient to justify their belief that God (as conceived in Christianity's "robust theism") exists (92). For most people this evidence is not ecstatic, visionary, or otherwise "mystical." On the contrary, it consists initially of God's authoritative call, experienced through conscience, to act in agreement with the standards of perfect love. According to Moser, this call can be either willingly received or willfully suppressed. Those who willingly "attune" themselves to this call can have additional, diachronic evidence of God's existence as the Holy Spirit empowers them to surrender selfish interests and to love others more fully (113). The role of the will in this epistemology situates Moser in opposition to some forms of Calvinism and Augustinianism—a minor theme in the book. Paul's epistles are the primary biblical inspiration for this "pneumatic epistemology," but Moser also detects it in contemporary theologians such as Karl Rahner and Emil Brunner (150). Moser's emphasis on the evidential significance of Christian moral transformation motivates his rejection of nonevidential fideism (as a cognitively irresponsible and arbitrary attitude) and his suspicion of natural theology (as inconclusive "spectator evidence" irrelevant to God's redemptive purpose in self-revelation) (47). The book develops several corollary theological implications of the central epistemological thesis, with special attention given to the issues of atonement, eschatology, and theodicy.

The problem with agnostics who complain about the lack of evidence for God's existence (Bertrand Russell being the primary exemplar in the book) is that they ignore the challenging kind of evidence that would serve divine purposes and seek instead the safe kind that they would prefer. Moser calls the former "purposively available evidence" (2). He argues that, according to Christianity, God's central revelatory goal is fellowship with human beings brought about by the transformation of their "volitional centers" from selfishness to love (135). He imagines several reasons why God might "hide" evidence of other types in pursuit of that goal and provide instead evidence that simul-

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taneously judges, forgives, and transforms willing recipients (107). To explore purposively available evidence is to face one's moral failures and to surrender one's comfortable pride and idolatry—a difficult and painful process. Moser concludes that most agnostic attitudes, therefore, are not caused by mere oversight of purposively available evidence but rather by willful rejection of it motivated by the desire for selfish autonomy.

One weakness of the book is that it rarely gives sustained attention to the arguments of its opponents. Moser's justifications for beliefs about God's existence (and, more importantly, for beliefs about the imperative of obedience to God) rest heavily on a certain type of religious experience, but he hardly engages the extensive philosophical objections to such beliefs. He points out that theistic beliefs can be justified for a person who has the relevant type of experience, even if she or he has not formulated an argument for them, as long as these beliefs are not defeated for that person. A "defeater," as Moser uses the term, consists of evidence that challenges the support for a belief or the truth that it indicates (63). The mere fact that theistic beliefs based on experience can be justified might be of apologetic interest to some Christians unaware of the purported defeaters, but Moser does not aim to preach to the choir in this book. This is a work of philosophy addressed in part to religious skeptics, and it seems reasonable to expect more attention to the purported defeaters of such beliefs than the reader gets.

To be fair, such attention is not altogether absent. The primary defeater that skeptics advance against beliefs based on religious experiences is that naturalistic explanations of those experiences are superior to theistic explanations. Moser replies, first, that Christian theism might be a person's best available explanation of the totality of the evidence she or he has, including the experience of transformative love, but he does not tell the reader how that argument might go or what the naturalistic alternatives might look like. Perhaps he does not take it up here because he has addressed the concept of "best available explanation" in previous work (*Knowledge and Evidence* [New York, 1989]), though not with his pneumatic epistemology specifically in mind. Second, for about one page he argues that it would be implausible to attribute the kind of moral transformation constituting evidence of God's existence to human effort or other natural causes (137). The argument is significantly underdeveloped as a serious reply to this proposed defeater.

I suspect that Moser's intention here is less to engage in a scholastic exchange with the critics of religious experience and more to issue a philosophically sophisticated altar call. His rhetorical emphasis on the first-hand evidential value of voluntary attunement to God's "transformative gift" (134) helps explain the zeal of statements like the following: "we ourselves are at stake, living dangerously and fleetingly in the teeth of destructive selfishness and impending death. The epistemology of robust theism, we'll see, has urgent significance beyond the casual speculation typical of professional philosophy" (84). Some readers might wish for less "epistemologists in the hands of an angry God" exhortation in this book and more argumentative engagement with philosophical concerns about religious experience. For those who experience God unambiguously in their moral development, however, this approach will likely offer an original, plausible, and even edifying reply to agnostics who demand some other form of evidence to justify belief in God.

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