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GOD AND ARGUMENT

I.

Debates about God's existence are alive and well. Many people are curious about the divine and in need of clarity. Moreover, plenty of atheists aren't certain God doesn't exist, and plenty of theists have lingering doubts, too. And so we argue and argue, yet we don't resolve very much. Why? Now, with this question I am not asking *why we do it*—the question of God's existence is a significant philosophical question, perhaps the most significant. It's clear, then, why we continue arguing about it. It is significant, we disagree, and we feel that reason should help with the matter. To pass it over without deliberation would be irresponsible. Rather, I ask *why the debate persists without resolution*. Plenty of very smart folks have thought long and hard about the god-question and have developed some serious arguments, so it's not like it's amateur hour with this question. So, why is it, given our interest and investment of time and intellectual energy, that the debate hasn't found resolution? Call this the *continued debate phenomenon*, and the question is what its explanation is.

We might start with two cynical hypotheses about the continued debate phenomenon. First, the explanation may be that this is just what *philosophical* debates are—they are the kind of matters about which there are only reasonable positions (at best), but no knowledge. Consequently, there will be *debate*, as the sides can be reasonable, but there will not be *resolution*, as the reasonability of any side is insufficient to win over converts by close of rejoinder by evidence.

The second cynical hypothesis needn't be that it's because of the *philosophical* nature of the question, but because of the *evidential* nature of the question. The question of God's existence is too complicated for us, or the evidence is too conflicted. And so, instead of reasonable sides, we have people merely expressing their preferences or prejudices one way or the other and gerrymandering the evidence as they see fit. Since the matter is complicated and fraught with intrusion of rationalizing dogmatism, the debate will persist.

I have little to say about these cynical explanations. I mention them only to contextualize my engagement with a substantive explanation to come. But a brisk point about philosophical cynicism is in order. Let me put it this way: they have what one might call the *grownup illusion* surrounding them. Here is how the grownup illusion works. Consider the rhetorical force of an adult responding to the pointless and endless bickering of children: the adult's perspective is authoritative about what really matters and what the debates really come to. And that works when the grownup really is a grownup and the children really are children. Here's the trouble: we're all grownups here, and none of the cynics are all that much more clear-eyed about the evidential or prejudicial situations as any of the first-order disputants. Moreover, we might even say that the cynical perspective infects itself, as it is a perennial issue of whether philosophical questions are rationally resolvable and whether we merely rationalize when we

approach specific questions. The consequence is that the cynic's view is on the same level as those whose views the cynic was so cynical about. Cynicism, consistently deployed, yields philosophical flatland. Any cynic denying this is going to need an argument, and so it must start all over again.

An atheistic hypothesis as to what explains the continued debate phenomenon is as follows. By hypothesis, God is good and wants the best for us. Since God is good and made us to love Him and be in personal connection with Him, He wants us to know Him. And not knowing Him is a bad thing for us—we suffer uncertainty, lack meaning, feel lost. If we know God, we must know He exists. If we know God exists, then we won't have uncertainty. We are uncertain of God's existence—that's what the continued debate phenomenon is. The best explanation for this is that God doesn't exist—were He to exist, you might say, He'd be easier to find and know for those who search for Him. It's a special version of the problem of evil, really, and the continued debate phenomenon is the data. And so the explanation for continued debate is God's non-existence.

The challenge to the theist, then, is squaring the uncertainty and what seems a clear bad for humans from a theological perspective with God's goodness, love, and capacity. How can a God who hides or remains cloaked in mystery also be a good, just, or loving God. How could such a God be worthy of worship? It seems that God failing to be at least some of these things (or failing to be at all) is the best explanation.

Paul Moser's recent "God without Argument"<sup>1</sup> is an attempt to accomplish two things: (i) explain the continued debate phenomenon in purely epistemic terms, and (ii) show that the epistemic differences that yield continued debate are theologically coherent with a good, loving and efficacious God. Moser's central claim is that having sufficient evidence is not always a matter of having a winning argument; rather, sometimes that sufficient evidence is non-discursive. As a consequence, the continued debate phenomenon is the result of a confusion of *having* with *sharing* one's reasons.

## II.

To start, the challenge for the theist is to give an explanation for the continued debate phenomenon that can salvage the epistemic status of god-belief. Moser's answer to the challenge is that some epistemic status can be achieved without correlate argumentative force – that there are some kinds of evidence that you can only *have* and then *talk about*, but one cannot *share* it. Consequently, it is possible for the theist to have epistemic justification for god-beliefs, but not be in a winning argumentative position. Moser has two lines of argument for this view: one theological, the other epistemic.

Moser's theological argument is that God is the being worthy of worship, and God offers redemptive love to humans in virtue of His perfect goodness.<sup>2</sup> Such an agent would seek what is morally and spiritually best for all beings; particularly, God seeks "reconciliation" with them. This means that God will

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<sup>1</sup> In *Is Faith in God Reasonable?* Edited by Corey Miller and Paul Gould, (New York: Routledge), 69-83.

<sup>2</sup> Moser, "God without Argument," 69.

undertake the occasional “redemptive intervention” into these individual lives, but these interventions must be both *individual* (so that they establish a personal relationship for redemption) and also *sensitive* to the variances of individual receptivity. What follows is that God will be hidden from many, particularly those who reject Him. He must hide from some people until they are receptive of a redemptive relationship with Him. “God (will) be elusive in ways required by his perfect redemptive love.”<sup>3</sup>

The upshot of the theological view, then, is that because of the individual nature of God’s presence in a life, we may *speak about* this relationship, but we cannot also *communicate it* or *bring it about* in another by way only of our testimony. God’s presence is indexed to individuals as individuals; one cannot share that relationship, as we are not fungible.

Moser’s second argument is that epistemic justification for believing in God does not depend on *having an argument*. Moser captures the thought: “This God, if real, is no conclusion, statement or proposition of any sort.”<sup>4</sup> Justification for belief in God does not come from attending to His existence as though it were a proposition being weighed for endorsement. To know God, arguments, even if compelling, “would interfere with such an aim by directing human attention away from God Himself.”<sup>5</sup>

Consider this point on analogy with the foundational justification one receives from attending to one’s experiences. When one observes, say, a red apple, one doesn’t need *an argument* to be justified in holding there is a red apple. Rather, one just needs to look, to open one’s eyes. An argument that it is a red apple before you is a distraction from what is manifestly right before you. Similarly, reasons Moser, with divine presence:

Evidence is not exhausted by arguments, given that the evidence provided by experience is not always an argument. . . . If one can have a direct experience of God, and thereby have foundational evidence of God’s reality, we need to ask what value, if any, is there in an argument for God’s existence.<sup>6</sup>

*Argumentism*, the view that one’s justification is exhausted by one’s arguments, is wrong about empirical knowledge and knowledge of God. This is because such a view “neglects that God could provide salient evidence for God’s reality to humans by a divine self-manifestation.”<sup>7</sup>

Moser’s explanation for the continued debate phenomenon is then multiform. First, the continued debate phenomenon is the result of a confusion shared between both sides—that *argument* will transmit evidence and thereby resolve the issue. Those with the first-person experience of God’s redemption should know better, and those without the experiences and who want only arguments

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<sup>3</sup> Moser, “God without Argument,” 70.

<sup>4</sup> Moser, “God without Argument,” 71.

<sup>5</sup> Moser, “God without Argument,” 71.

<sup>6</sup> Moser, “God without Argument,” 73.

<sup>7</sup> Moser, “God without Argument,” 71.

should eventually come to realize they are missing out on something. In short, the research model is wrong.

Inquirers about God should investigate this kind of experience, and not just philosophical arguments about the existence of God. Arguments can divert attention from, and obscure the importance of, this kind of experience.<sup>8</sup>

The trouble is that “the key evidence is not an argument,” but the primary means we take to evaluate belief in God is that by way of argument. The means, it seems, when it does not work, actually polarizes people, and as a consequence makes many *less* receptive to God’s personal interventions, which itself further polarizes. Thus, the phenomenon of continued debate not only exists, but has become a vicious cycle.

### III.

There are two points of pushback on Moser’s line of thought. I will present them serially and then turn to a metaphilosophical point I believe refocuses discussion.

First, I believe that the argumentist can concede Moser’s analogy with perceptual justification – one does have *prima facie* non-discursive justification for one’s judgments about perceptual and religious experience. But that is not the end of the issue. Given that a subject (S) can have *prima facie* empirical justification for believing Fx when S is appeared to Fx-ly, S can have similar *prima facie* justification for believing in a redeeming God if S has first-personal redeeming-God experiences. The trouble is not with the initial justification on the analogy, but with the host of defeaters that loom for the analogues.

Consider whether S would be justified in believing there is an apple present when many fail either (a) to have the experience under similar conditions, (b) undergo the experience in similar conditions but claim there are no apples present in it, (c) have the experiences but claim they are of a *green* apple, or (d) have the experiences but hold that they are merely hallucinatory. It seems that when faced with this circumstance, unless there were no question-begging accounts of how to arbitrate the disagreements, the believer has an undercutting defeater (or perhaps a range of both undercutting and rebutting defeaters) for her initial justification. The reason why those who believe in red apples before them on the basis of being appeared to red-apple-ly is not just that they have those experiences, but because there is little disagreement about the apple under the right conditions. And were there disagreement, we’d have a way to address it. Having all those pieces in order is required for justification.

The same should go for the religious believer here. The trouble is that there is wide disagreement about and variance in religious experience. There are those who (a) try to have religious experiences and subject themselves to all the rigors of religious ritual and abasement before the divine but never feel the presence of god, (b) those who have religious experiences but hold the experiences are non-theistic, (c) those who have religious experiences but hold that the god they reveal is significantly different from others, and (d) those who hold that the

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<sup>8</sup> Moser, “God without Argument,” 77.

experiences have all the same content as the Moser-style-redeeming religious experiences, but who hold also that these experiences are hallucinatory, even in the midst of having them. These defeaters *come to light* in argumentative contexts, for sure, and we see why, under these conditions that arguments from religious experience are very weak testimonial arguments. But what of the reflexive status of attestors? *Others* don't have justification for believing on the basis of their testimony, but *do they themselves*?

Moser's case for the affirmative answer is that one should consider all those who fail to have the right kind of experience as *epistemically badly placed*, God's "self-manifestation" depends on whether the person is "a suitably cooperative human".<sup>9</sup> Because so many resist God's call, they either do not experience his presence or have massively distorted experiences of Him. I should hasten to note that elsewhere Moser concedes that cooperativeness isn't sufficient for the experience, but something simply conducive of God's redemptive self-revelation.<sup>10</sup> But the question is, then, the theodicy of that variance. There are, of course, sociological explanations.

The trouble, it is clear, is that one must be able to explain why one's experience is veridical and all the other competing experiences are not. Appealing to the facts that one has the experience, is transformed by it, or feels it deeply is insufficient, since those features do not distinguish these experiences from their competitors in the relevant epistemic fashion.

The second piece of pushback against Moser's line of thought is simply to deny the view that there is a significant analogy between perceptual-experiential presentation and religious experience. Two disanalogies. First, we have reason to hold perceptual experience to have law-like conditions for veridicality because we have a rough idea of how it occurs, what the proper conditions for the experience are, and so on. Red apples are best seen in good lighting at a medium distance; movies require low lighting and one should be further back, and so on. Because we have no independent idea of their objects or systematic connection between religious experiences and its veridicality; religious experience has none of this character. We can't explain according to any lawful rules of experience why one of our experiences works better than others. God may show up because of our obedience to and abasement before him, yet sometimes even our devotion and utmost obsequiousness aren't enough.

The second disanalogy is that it is hard to understand what the content of a religious experience is. For sure, a picture is worth a thousand words, so even a visual experience of a red apple might require some sophisticated vocabulary to get it all out. But we can do it and communicate what that content is. But religious experience doesn't seem to have that feature. God speaks... but is it an auditory impression? God is present... but is He, like, right next to me? God redeems ... but what, really, is that *experience*? The more one says about religious experience, the more it sounds like the phenomenology isn't of a first-order

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<sup>9</sup> Moser, "God without Argument," 76.

<sup>10</sup> See Paul Moser, *The Elusive God*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and "Gethsemane Epistemology, Pneumatic Evidence, and Divine *Agape*," Evangelical Philosophical Society, 2013, available at: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=200>

experience, but of a cognitive phenomenology. That is, religious experience is more the phenomenology of what it is like to *believe that* there is a present, loving redeeming God. *Religious experience, when properly described, is more the experience of holding one's religious beliefs.* And notice that this is a pretty nice way to explain the coincidence of religious experience with religious belief. It's not that there's an experience of God that's interpreted differently, but that there is a wide breadth of beliefs that yield different experiences of holding them. If that's the case, then, the experience provides no justification for religious belief. It is merely its reiteration.

#### IV.

The metaphilosophical lesson, as I take it, is that in philosophy, argument is supreme. The Moser case is an object lesson in this—if we are to lay claim to justification for our views, even if it is only to defend ourselves against the critical charges of others (not to commend the view to them), we must argue. This is especially so with matters that are both significant and conflicted. Begging off the argumentative program mis-judges the relevant factors for the rationality of the beliefs. Anselm, who addresses the ontological argument, not to fools, but to God Himself, recognizes this point—that argument makes explicit what that connection is.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, I believe that this rebuts the unfortunately widely held view that argument yields greater polarization.

Consider the widespread view that one should not discuss religion or politics in mixed company. Robert Talisse and I term this view “Mom’s Maxim” in our *Reasonable Atheism*.<sup>12</sup> It is a social coping strategy of avoiding uncomfortable and contentious debate. The hope is that by avoiding the debate and face-to-face argument, by focusing on the things on which we agree, we won’t polarize. However, it is with the cessation of argument that polarization ensues. The leading contributor to polarization of views is not reasoned exposure to competing commitments, but rather the fact of echo chambers wherein one’s opponents are not present to argue. It is when the opposition’s reasoning isn’t represented (or is represented badly) that views begin to polarize. The prime example is that with views on abortion. People’s views polarize to radical versions most often when they are surrounded only by articulations of views on their own side.<sup>13</sup> It is only with the rigorous and overt exchange of reasons that we do not polarize. For sure, familiarity may breed contempt, but it is failures of argumentative exchange that breeds the political and moral failures that are manifest in polarized intellectual cultures.

A further metaphilosophical point is in the offing in this discussion. It’s that one’s epistemology influences how one frames philosophical method. Moser proposes his view as a version of “experiential foundationalism,” and the case for the view is along two familiar epistemic fronts. The first is one already reviewed, namely, that there seem to be clear cases of non-discursive (and non-doxastic) epistemic support. This case can be conceded without conceding the

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<sup>11</sup> See Scott Aikin and Michael Hodges, “St. Anselm’s Ontological Argument as Expressive,” *Philosophical Investigations* 37:2 (2013): 130-151.

<sup>12</sup> Scott Aikin and Robert Talisse, *Reasonable Atheism* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> For a review of this case and the literature, see Cass Sunstein, *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 45-7.

epistemic support from religious experiences. Moser's second argument is the familiar regress argument—that “if all evidence is an argument, we face a devastating regress problem.”<sup>14</sup> For sure, dialectical requirements for justification risk the dreaded regress problem for knowledge, but these are not reasons for fully forego them. First, the dialectical requirement isn't that one must be able to *share* one's evidence, but merely be able to *announce* and *articulate* that content. The conditions for justification-transmission are familiar conditions for trustworthy testimony. So, regress needn't loom here. And were it to, I don't see it as vicious.<sup>15</sup> Second, dialectical demands are ones that tie in with the idea that rationality has an intersubjective feature to it—that reason's core is that it allows us to be mutually intelligible and capable of reflexive intelligibility, too. That's why critical dialogue is the model. That many dialogues are ongoing and perhaps interminable is simply testament to the fact that knowledge about the Big Questions is very, very difficult. But did we expect anything different?

As a consequence, I believe the continued debate phenomenon is an acceptable state of affairs. Again, I hold it is acceptable because I believe it is more evidence (or meta-evidence) for the view that I not only believe is right, but I hope is right.<sup>16</sup> But I think it's a good thing for other reasons, too. Argument, when done right, is an impediment to polarized discourse and puts us in positions wherein we must acknowledge the rationality of our fellows – even those whom we believe wrong about the most important matters. And finally, the continued debate phenomenon is a good thing, because if I am wrong, and there is a good and redeeming God, I expect it would be someone with Moser's argumentative skill and insight that could help bring me around. For that to happen, we've got to keep arguing.

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<sup>14</sup> Moser, “God without Argument,” 78.

<sup>15</sup> Scott F. Aikin, *Epistemology and the Regress Problem* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> For an account of why it would be a good thing if God did not exist, see Scott Aikin, “The Problem of Worship,” *Think* 9:25 (2010) 101-113; and Aikin and Talisse, *Reasonable Atheism*.