

## USAGE STATEMENT & AGREEMENT

- **This document is the property of the author(s) and of [www.epsociety.org](http://www.epsociety.org).**
- **This document has been made available for your individual usage.**
- **It's possible that the ideas contained in this document are of a "preprint" quality. Please consult the author(s) for any updated content.**
- **If you quote from this document, whether for personal or professional purposes, please give appropriate attribution and link to the original URL whenever you cite it.**
- **Please do not upload or store this document to any personal or organization owned website, intranet, portal, server, FTP area, or any other shared space.**
- **You are permitted to store this document on your own individual, privately-owned computer or device.**
- **By opening this document, you have agreed to abide by the above stated usage policy.**
- ***We welcome your comments and interaction about the ideas shared in this document by going to [www.epsociety.org](http://www.epsociety.org)!***

# Is Paul Moser Among the Swinburnian Philosophical Theologians? “Is Saul also among the prophets?” I Samuel 19:24

Charles Taliaferro  
Philosophy Department  
St. Olaf College  
Northfield, MN

**Abstract:** While Paul Moser distances himself from philosophical projects such as Richard Swinburne’s natural theology, I suggest that he and Swinburne may be working in the same vineyard or, to no longer speak in parables, they both employ a similar epistemology. While I believe that (what I see as both) Moser’s and Swinburne’s epistemology is sound and they are both right about the meaning of life from the standpoint of theism and naturalism, I urge both to spend a little more time on the role of love in contrasting theism and naturalism. Finally, I urge Moser to be just a little less Manichean in his view of death.

**P**aul Moser’s work in philosophy of religion, and especially the epistemology of religious belief with his insightful project to re-situate the debate over evidence into the context of personal redemption, is immensely valuable and has achieved the level of originality and power of his earlier work in epistemology and realism. He writes with great passion and engagement. My contribution here is intended to be friendly and in the spirit of the admonition of I Corinthians 1:12-13: Some of you say “I am of Paul Moser” or “I am of Richard Swinburne.” Has epistemology been divided? I shall seek reconciliation between ostensibly different positions.

## Cognitive Idolatry?

In many publications and presentations, Moser has argued against the success or wisdom of natural theology and of philosophical attempts to argue for the reality of God from a neutral or detached point of view. He argues for this partly in terms of proposing that if there truly is a God who is morally perfect, worthy of adoration, and who calls us to put away selfish desires and live a new life in relation to this redemptive God, then the evidence of this God

would come to us in a way that involves our humility and openness to be saved by this God. Moser also proposes that those who argue for the reality of God without taking this route are in danger of playing God or committing a kind of idolatry.

Another area where we play God concerns what is to count as suitable evidence of God's reality. We presume to be in a position, on our own, to say what kind of evidence God must supply regarding God's reality. We reason, in agreement with Bertrand Russell and many other philosophers: If God is real, God would be revealed in a way W. For instance, God would show up with considerable fireworks or at least pomp and circumstance. God, however, is not revealed in way W. Hence, God is not real... We thereby exalt ourselves as cognitive judge, jury, and executioner over God. God, we suppose, must be revealed on our cognitive terms. In such cognitive idolatry... we set up our cognitive standards in ways that preclude so-called "reasonable" acknowledgment of God's reality.<sup>1</sup>

Brief clarification: I assume that in that last sentence, Moser is claiming that an idolatrous epistemology is one that does not recognize evidence of God that does not conform to its standards. Idolatrous epistemology is faulted because it entails that alternative means of our coming to know of God to be reasonable in name only. Moser continues the above claims with the following life and death scenario:

Our cognitive pride thus becomes suicidal. We play God to our own demise. The reality of our impending death exhibits that without the true God, we are ultimately hopeless. We are then imposters of God.<sup>2</sup>

In response, consider two points. First, it is hard not to see Moser undertaking a similar form of reasoning that he condemns as idolatry. Moser's argument can be put in this form: If God is truly morally perfect, worthy of adoration, and seeks us to abandon selfishness and come to be in relationship with human subjects as their creator and redeemer, then God would remain

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Moser, "Divine Hiddenness, Death, and Meaning" in *Exploring the Meaning of Life; An Anthology and Guide*, ed. By J.W. Seachris (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 485. This essay first appeared in *Philosophy of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Issues*, ed. By Paul Copan and Chad Meister (Malden: Wiley and Blackwell). I have commented on Moser's other work in different places, including *Philosophia Christi* 14:2 (Winter 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Moser, "Divine Hiddenness," p. 485.

hidden from the impartial inquirer and be revealed instead to those who put away selfishness to encounter the God of Jesus Christ. Further, if God is morally perfect and he is right about the way this God would be revealed to us, alternative epistemologies to this way of knowing God are flawed (and perhaps even worthy of condemnation as idolatrous, a serious charge). This mode of reasoning seems quite similar to that which is employed by the “idolaters.” Before moving to the second point, perhaps Moser’s somewhat a priori reasoning about what kinds of evidence a morally perfect God would bestow is distinct from those whom he castigates as idolaters because of the *attitudes* involved. Moser writes and speaks in a passionate, confessional manner that compels (or at least invites) others to examine their own motives and vices (especially the vice of selfishness), whereas Swinburne, like many in the natural law tradition (including one of Swinburne’s favorite ideal philosophers, Bishop Butler), writes with what seems like more detachment. Let’s assume that is the case. Moser writes with greater urgency, challenging us to change the way we approach the search for evidence of God, whereas Swinburne is not calling for a change that would make philosophical inquiry into God’s existence more affective and personal.

Even if all that is true, Moser’s characterization of those philosophers he opposes does not strike me as obviously fair. With respect, I suggest it is just a tad misleading to think that those (mostly natural theologians like Swinburne) who build a case for theism on the grounds of the impartial pursuit of the truth are akin to those who might expect God to produce “fireworks or at least pomp and circumstance”! The former is a mere light show, mostly for entertainment, and the latter Sir Edward Elgar’s military march which since evolved into graduation ceremony. When, say, Swinburne proposes that a philosophical inquiry into the nature of the cosmos, the emergence of consciousness, the widespread testimony of the apparent experience of the divine, and more, and he concludes that all such evidence makes the existence of the God of theism more probable than not, Swinburne is appealing to things like light shows or (often) pompous ceremonies? And is Swinburne’s approach to natural theology really akin to an exaltation of a human being (and others who engage in similar philosophical theology, such as myself) who functions as a “judge, jury, and executioner over God”? I assume Moser does not actually think Swinburne ever set out to “execute,” that is, “kill,” the idea of God. So, why not use a different metaphor? The metaphor Moser uses of an “imposter” (Moser’s term) to describe those who employ a priori epistemology (those who reason that if God is real, then God would be revealed in a way W) seems a bit over-reaching. I think it is reasonable to think that while a morally perfect God

might use imposters to state truths, but it unreasonable to think a morally perfect God would use all and only imposters.

Perhaps natural theologians such as Swinburne and I are not like people of “pride” who have become “suicidal”.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps we are like explorers searching for something truly worthwhile. Imagine a disease has broken out called *materialistic naturalism* that seems to devour everything in its path. (More on why materialistic naturalism may be thought of as leading to a devouring hopelessness below.) Swinburne, William Craig, Bishop Butler, J.P. Moreland, Stewart Goetz and others respond by looking for clues about how to cure the disease and immunize those who are not yet infected! Perhaps they fail to find what they need and want, but in this metaphor natural theologians come out looking a little better than a light show audience or people who love to parade around in robes (cf. Luke 20:46).

I now turn to a further charge: Moser is not that distant from those of us who practice philosophical theology in the manner and likeness of Richard Swinburne. On faith, Moser writes:

Whatever else it is, it is not a call to leap beyond the evidence, as if faith in God were necessarily defective from a cognitive viewpoint. Trust in God can, in principle, be at least as cognitively good as your trusting in your best friend.<sup>4</sup>

What follows below is Moser’s account of coming to an awareness of God. When he writes of “God emerges as my God” I assume what he is referring to is the reality of God becoming manifest or appearing to him as his God.

As I yield to God’s call to obey, as Jesus did, God emerges as my God, and I thereby become God’s servant and child. Only in such volitional yielding on my part does God become my God. My firm knowledge of God as my God thus depends on volitional factors concerning me, concerning my exercise of my will in relation to God.<sup>5</sup>

Moser thinks the above transformative experience (the relationship with the manifest God) is not the sort of experience that can yield a non-question begging argument for the God who is revealed in the experience.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 485.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 489.

The evidence from the presence of God's Spirit does not yield a non-question-begging argument for God's reality. This is not a problem, because the reality of evidence does not depend on a non-question begging argument. For example, I do not have a non-question-begging argument for my belief that I am awake now (at least relative to an extreme skeptic's questions), but I still have good evidence that I am awake now. Whether an argument is non-question-begging varies with the question actually raised in an exchange.<sup>6</sup>

Moser likens the position of the religious believer to someone who has evidence of moral truths.

Evidence from the presence of God's Spirit is akin to the evidence from conscience regarding, for instance, the goodness of a case of self-giving kindness and the evil of a case of needless torture. Such evidence from conscience, although genuine, does not yield a non-question-begging argument against skeptics, but it is no defect in the evidence.<sup>7</sup>

Is this approach to the experience of the divine fundamentally different from Swinburne's?

I suggest that Moser's position cannot dispense with what Swinburne termed a credulity principle and Kai Man Kwan has termed a principle of critical trust.<sup>8</sup> Such a basic principle of appearance can be put in different formulations, but it is essentially the thesis that if some state of affairs appears to you to be the case (and there is no reason not to trust that the appearance is reliable) then it is reasonable to believe that the state of affairs obtains. In the above accounts, I suggest that the appearance principle fits admirably in the case of God's reality becoming manifest as it does also in the case of moral experience and the conviction that one is awake. And I think that the fact (assuming this is a fact) that many persons report what seems like the reality of God becoming manifest to them can and should be considered evidence that God exists, just as the apparent experience of the goodness and evil of some events counts as some evidence that the events are genuinely good and evil, and similarly for the conviction that one is awake. Moser rightly notes that charges of begging the question depend on the questions at issue. So the claim

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> See: Kai Man Kwan, *Rainbow of Experiences, Critical Trust, and God* (New York and London: Continuum, 2011).

that I as a person seem to experience the divine begs the question against those who deny that persons exist. Perhaps there is not an argument in philosophy that does not beg some question against some conceivable position. So, the fact (if it is one) that an argument from religious experience will beg some question with some persons or positions does not discount it as being capable of standing as a philosophical argument. Arguments from religious experience (as with any philosophical argument that appeals to experience) therefore need to be carefully constructed with an awareness of when the appearance of some state of affairs counts as evidence of the divine and when not.

Let us now consider Moser's assessment of the price of accepting materialistic naturalism.

### Putting some love in our hearts

Moser does an outstanding job in contrasting our fate, given materialistic naturalism.

Given materialism, we will no longer be persons after our death. So, there is no lasting good future. Our destiny is just the abyss of dispersed physical energy. We will then have, in the abyss, no value in ourselves because we have ceased to exist. People who were once valuable will then no longer be valuable. We will no longer be important, or worthwhile. Our existence and value will have ceased, never to be recovered. Some people may remember us, but mere memories are not the persons we are. We ourselves will not survive in memories. We will be gone forever, dispersed and done for, given materialism.<sup>9</sup>

I believe the above is plausible. And I agree with Moser that even if it is true we are destined for annihilation, it does not follow that our lives have no value now. "The fact that we have no *lasting* value, given materialism, doesn't entail that we have no value at all. We can still have *temporary* value...[even if] our ultimate future [is] bleak."<sup>10</sup> In this way, Moser is able to respond to skeptics such as Simon Blackburn who argues that we may find life worthwhile and satisfying in the moment, irrespective of impending future loss. But I believe that the contrast between theism and naturalism can be seen in especially clear terms if our focus is not on the fear and despair of our impending loss of value, but in terms of what is involved with truly loving and treasuring the life and

---

<sup>9</sup> Moser, "Divine Hiddenness," p. 482.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

value we have now, focusing first on what it is to love others and only later reflecting on loving or valuing our own life. To see how this may be true, let us take a closer look at Blackburn's approach to our temporary values.

In his essay "Religion and respect," Blackburn repudiates any consolation that may come from theism or the belief in some other cosmic saving force. While no hope is on its way from beyond human history, we may yet find value in that which is most immediate.

But there is another option for meaning...which is to look only within life itself. This is the immanent option. It is content with the everyday. There is sufficient meaning for human beings in the human world –the world of familiar, and even humdrum, doings and experiences. In the immanent option, the smile of the baby, the grace of the dancer, the sound of voices, the movement of a lover, give meaning to life. For some, it is activity and achievements: gaining the summit of the mountain, crossing the finish line first, finding the cure or writing the poem. These things last only their short time, but that does not deny them meaning. A smile does not need to go on forever in order to mean what it does. There is nothing beyond or apart from the process of life. There is no one goal to which all these processes tend, but we can find something precious, value and meaning, in the processes themselves.<sup>11</sup>

On the surface, this seems sensible. However, if one truly loves the smiling baby and all the other things Blackburn lists, what makes sense in terms of what we would love or hope for in terms of the cosmos and the possibility of redemption by God?

Consider the following thought experiment. Given that you love the smiling baby (actually, strictly speaking Blackburn refers to 'the smile of the baby, not the baby herself, but I shall assume it would be hard to love the smile without loving the baby) which of these two realities would you hope is the case?

Reality One: The smiling baby (let's call her Mary) lives to become a graceful dancer who sings in a wonderful choir, has a wonderful loving, intimate partner with whom she enjoys climbing mountains, competing in sports and discovering the cure for great diseases, and she enjoys writing poetry. At death, the person perishes everlastingly, as does her partner, all those who loved and enjoyed her.

---

<sup>11</sup> Blackburn cited by Joshua Seachris, "General Introduction" to *Exploring the Meaning of Life* (Boston, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 13.



Reality Two: The smiling baby Mary grows up to become a graceful dancer who sings in a wonderful choir, has a wonderful loving, intimate partner with whom she enjoys climbing mountains, competing in sports and discovering the cure for great diseases, and she enjoys writing poetry. There is nothing beyond life, but life includes the living One who has created and is sustaining the cosmos in being and who can “overcome death and is worthy of worship, i.e. unconditional commitment and adoration” (484). This living, loving powerful One acts to offer redemption to Mary and all persons through calling us to renounce evil and sin, and come into a great loving union with the One in a life beyond this life.

One reason why one might not hope Reality Two is the case is because the very notion of an afterlife seems metaphysically or conceptually absurd. Even so, if you truly love Mary, wouldn't you hope that Reality Two was the case? I think that by focusing the thought experiment in terms of what you would do if you truly love another person, we deflect putting the stress on our self-serving or self-centered concern with what death will mean for ourselves, e.g. “we will no longer be important.” If I desire to always be important, then this seems a bit more like a Promethean desire than, say, the desire of a St. Francis of Assisi. But if we turn the tables and we think of St. Francis's love for the poor, I propose it would be shocking if the Saint did not pray that they may forever be important to the loving God he worships and follows. And if they are forever important to the most Holy, living God, there is also a reasonable hope that they may not find death the end of their very being.

Three minor, additional points on Blackburn's immanent alternative are worth making. First, Blackburn's thesis that “a smile does not need to go on forever in order to mean what it does” is clever, for the task of holding a smile indefinitely conjures up the idea of a forced smile. Forced smiles, like forced laughter often feels like something faked and disingenuous. But it is another thing altogether to be indifferent about whether the person smiling will live on, whether for seconds, days, years, or beyond that in union with the God of Christian faith.

Second, Blackburn's comments suggest that if theism is true there is one goal to which all things (should or are made to) tend? While Christian faith does identify inseparable common goals in human life (love of God and love of neighbor), this is not a call to homogeneity or us loving God and neighbor in the same ways; historically, Christianity has always recognized the good in any number of different meaningful ways to life that are hallowed by God.

Finally, I find the contrast between Blackburn's concept of meaning and good versus Moser's to be captured near the end of G.K. Chesterton's 1909 publication *Orthodoxy*:

The mass of men have been forced to be gay about the little things, but sad about the big ones. Nevertheless (I offer my last dogma defiantly) it is not native to man to be so. Man is more himself, man is more manlike, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial. Melancholy should be an innocent interlude, a tender and fugitive frame of mind; praise should be the permanent pulsation of the soul. Pessimism is at best an emotional half-holiday; joy is the uproarious labour by which all things live. Yet, according to the apparent estate of man as seen by the pagan or the agnostic, this primary need of human nature can never be fulfilled. Joy ought to be expansive; but for the agnostic it must be contracted, it must cling to one corner of the world. Grief ought to be a concentration; but for the agnostic its desolation is spread through an unthinkable eternity. This is what I call being born upside down. The sceptic may truly be said to be topsy-turvy; for his feet are dancing upwards in idle ecstasies, while his brain is in the abyss. To the modern man the heavens are actually below the earth. The explanation is simple; he is standing on his head; which is a very weak pedestal to stand on. But when he has found his feet again he knows it. Christianity satisfies suddenly and perfectly man's ancestral instinct for being the right way up; satisfies it supremely in this; that by its creed joy becomes something gigantic and sadness something special and small. The vault above us is not deaf because the universe is an idiot; the silence is not the heartless silence of an endless and aimless world. Rather the silence around us is a small and pitiful stillness like the prompt stillness in a sick-room. We are perhaps permitted tragedy as a sort of merciful comedy: because the frantic energy of divine things would knock us down like a drunken farce. We can take our own tears more lightly than we could take the tremendous levities of the angels. So we sit perhaps in a starry chamber of silence, while the laughter of the heavens is too loud for us to hear.<sup>12</sup>

I now turn to a minor matter about a rather large topic: death.

---

<sup>12</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, from *G. K. Chesterton: Collected Works* vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 365.

## A Plea to moderate a virtually Manichean view of death

Moser is no follower of Manicheism in its fullest or even partial form. But he does write of death as an evil power that is rightly seen as an object of fear. Moser writes: “The reality of death is the reality of a pervasive destructive *power*.”<sup>13</sup> There is no getting around the fact of death. As Bernard Shaw says (somewhere) the statistics about death are impressive; one out of every one person dies. Or as Moser puts it, “Death is universal for humans.”<sup>14</sup> Moser goes on to refer to death as a mighty power that “destroys us at least physically, if not mentally and socially too.”<sup>15</sup> Death’s “power seems immune to our best medicine and science. Death inevitably triumphs over humans and our powers.”<sup>16</sup> “Death will leave us in its cold wake, regardless of our cleverness, drive, or acquaintances.”<sup>17</sup> “Death is the intended wake-up call...Death announces that we need outside help...”<sup>18</sup>

All of this makes sense (in my view) and I understand how, once one dies to one’s selfishness and humbly sees the revealed God of love, one would face death with a faithful hope in God, but I also suggest that it may not be always helpful to think of death as a powerful thing. My death is not a thing or, strictly speaking, not a part of my life (except in the obvious ways in which I think of my death and its bearing on those around me and in my relationship with God). Dying is a process, but my death will be the end of my life (or the end of me in this life). Just as the edge of my desk is the end of my desk (or where my desk comes to an end) and not a part of it, the death of a person is a kind of privation, an absence. Strictly speaking, death cannot announce things or make wake-up calls or triumph over anything. Lest anyone think I am a hopeless reader, I know that Moser is using metaphors when making his claims about the implications of death (given materialism versus theism)! Even so, I think we would do better if we did not (however poetically) speak or think or respond to death as a positive power. Dying involves the loss of powers, and this loss could be due to a powerful illness or bomb. But death itself? I commend John Donne’s poem “Death be not Proud”:

---

<sup>13</sup> Moser, “Divine Hiddenness,” p. 482.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 483.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 484.

Death be not proud, though some have called thee Mighty and  
dreadfull, for, thou art not soe, For, those, whom thou think'st, thou  
dost overthrow, Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill mee.

I believe that Paul Moser comes to Donne's conclusion in the end, so my  
recommendation about how best to think of death, not as a powerful thing but  
as a privation, may be what Paul thinks of how one can come to see death from  
the vantage point of faith.

Paul Moser is among the best philosophers working today on any topic.  
My modest qualms over this or that are minor compared to the enormous  
respect I have for him. If he did not exist, he would have to be invented.

*Charles Taliaferro is Professor of Philosophy at St. Olaf College in  
Northfield, MN.*