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978-0-521-51656-3 - The Evidence for God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined

Paul K. Moser

Excerpt

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Introduction

“Many questions are answered wrongly, not because the evidence is contradictory or inadequate, but because the mind through its fundamental dispositions and presuppositions is out of focus with the only kind of evidence which is really available.”

– H.H. Farmer 1927, p. 5.

The question of whether God exists is at least as old as the hills, and the human race, too, but old age in this case has not yielded undisputed wisdom or even broad clarity. In fact, although obviously of first importance, the question of whether God exists has suffered from a certain widespread human bias regarding the manner in which we should approach it. The bias obscures how human inquirers themselves are arguably put under question, before God’s authority, in raising the question of whether God exists. This book uncovers this bias, challenges it, and offers an alternative, more defensible approach to the question of whether God exists. The result is a new perspective on the evidence for God.

Upon asking aright the question of whether God exists, the book contends, we find a morally robust version of theism that is cognitively resilient. We also then find that the evidence for God is not speculative, abstract, or casual, after all, but is, instead, morally and existentially challenging to us humans. This evidence thus extends beyond the

argumentative domain of philosophers and theologians, and engages people from all walks of life at the levels of who they are and who they should be. The evidence in question, we shall see, has a distinctive character: *this evidence becomes salient to inquirers as they, themselves, responsively and willingly become evidence of God's reality*, in willingly receiving and reflecting God's powerful moral character – specifically divine, unselfish love for others, even one's enemies. We shall call this *personifying evidence of God*, because it requires the evidence to be personified in an intentional agent, such as a purposive human, and thereby to be evidence inherently of an intentional agent. Such evidence, in keeping with its divine source, is inherently for the sake of others and, ideally, it is realized *intentionally* by humans for others. Philosophers, among many others, have neglected to look in this quarter for evidence of God, but this book offers the needed correction and thereby gives new foundations to belief in God.

Personifying human evidence of God, although widely neglected, would fit well with the reality of a God who aims not simply to inform humans but primarily to draw them noncoercively into taking on, or personifying, God's perfect moral character, in fellowship with God. Part of this divine aim would be to have humans become bearers of God's moral character in a way that brings God's distinctive, if elusive, presence near to others. This book presents the case for such morally challenging personifying evidence of God. In doing so, it attends to the role of human resistance to such evidence in obscuring the reality of not only this evidence but also God himself.

1. A WILDERNESS PARABLE

A reality-based parable will give us needed focus, and save us from undue abstractness, in our inquiry about God's existence. During summertime hiking, we have become lost in the expansive wilderness area of Hells Canyon between

western Idaho and northeastern Oregon. North America's deepest river gorge, Hells Canyon drops about 8,000 feet below Idaho's Seven Devils Mountains, and is carved by the wild Snake River. The Canyon is ten miles wide, and is happily free of cars, trucks, and even roads – and therefore McDonald's drive-throughs. It is notorious for being inaccessible by any easy means. Unfortunately, we have ended up deep in this river gorge, without a helpful exit map or any other worthwhile plan of departure.

We are now confronted with many difficulties, including the following: seemingly endless miles of seemingly directionless foot trails, dangerous western rattlesnakes, roaming mountain lions (a.k.a. cougars), howling coyotes, unpredictable temperatures, meager supplies, dying cell phone batteries, increasing hunger, and no satellite navigation system. However, we happen upon a dilapidated, abandoned shack hailing from the short-lived gold miners of the 1860s. The shack contains, not a double-quad-core computer with broadband internet access, but instead some rusty pots and pans and a barely functional amateur (ham) radio left behind recently by distracted employees of the US Forest Service. The radio's battery still works but probably not for long. As a result, our predicament in Hells Canyon seems bleak indeed, but perhaps is not without some hope. How, then, might we survive?

Obviously, we need a way out of Hells Canyon, sooner rather than later. In particular, we need instructions and even an *instructor* to help us to get out, given that we lack the resources, including a trustworthy plan, to make our way out on our own. We need a personal agent who is an intentional instructor, beyond mere instructions, because we need someone who (a) will intentionally and reliably identify our particular location now relative to a path that leads to our rescue, and (b) will supply further resources we will need along the path to our safety, including corrections, reminders, and perhaps even encouraging words to sustain us. As a result, we should not assume that our problem is

simply cognitive; in our journey to safety, we shall need some ongoing aid beyond known information.

A particularly noteworthy need concerns our deepest motives and related attitudes. If we are to be guided trustworthily but noncoercively along the path to safety, we will need to be ready and willing to be so guided. As a result, we may need some motivational and attitudinal transformation, and even moral transformation. We shall be particularly aware of this kind of need in subsequent discussion, once we turn directly to knowledge of God's reality. Even so, we need at least someone who can identify a trustworthy path from where we are now to eventual safety, in contrast with all of the dead ends facing us in the vast wilderness. A mere map or set of instructions will fail us, if only because we do not know our actual location on the map or in the instructions, and, in any case, we shall need ongoing intentional and corrective guidance along the path to safety. In short, the path we need calls for a path *finder* and a path *sustainer* for us. The first step for us is sincerely to acknowledge our need in our predicament.

Can we knowingly make contact with an intentional rescuer who will locate us and then help us to reach safety? If so, as we shall see, we would do well to ask what purposes *the rescuer has* in helping us to reach safety. Perhaps the rescuer's purposes are more profound and morally better than ours. The ham radio, at any rate, seems to be our only medium of hope, although it definitely has seen better days. Still, might it put us in touch with someone who will intentionally help us out of our lost state? If we fail in this connection, we will perish, given our breathtakingly austere wilderness surroundings. Our predicament in the river gorge is life or death, rescue or destruction. Our either-or situation is urgent and obvious; as a result, we should own it, and deal with it.

Is there life beyond Hells Canyon? Particularly, is there life *accessible by us* beyond Hells Canyon? The latter question now amounts to this: is there an intentional rescuer available

to us beyond Hells Canyon? Or, in other words, are we all up a river gorge without a rescuer? Being nothing if not orderly thinkers, we call an emergency strategy meeting to sort out our main options for handling the dire predicament before us.

Option 1: Despairing

We can just give up now in abject despair, yielding to hopelessness and its resulting destruction of us all. Our being lost will then become final, and our hope will disappear altogether as we ourselves disappear. On this option, we will yield to Hells Canyon as our wilderness grave, and give up on finding a way out to safety. Our conviction will be just this: “we can’t get there from here.” We then will not bother even to pursue the question of whether there is an intentional rescuer available to us beyond Hells Canyon. On this option, we are practical *atheists* about a rescuer, and we succumb to the downward pull of fatal despair. Still, we will have to face the question of whether, given our available evidence, our despairing is premature and at least initially ill-advised. We cannot responsibly ignore this life-or-death question.

Option 2: Passively Waiting

We can just sit back in the dilapidated miners’ shack and wait, largely in doubt, for any possible (if supposedly improbable) rescuer to find us. Our casual waiting must make do without a television and a computer, of course, but we might play tic-tac-toe or some other trivial pencil-and-paper game while we remain practically skeptical about the intervention of a rescuer. On this option, we are practical *agnostics* about a rescuer, and we might even take some pride in our disciplined refraining from actively seeking a rescuer. Our pride might be accompanied by a self-indulgent demand that we be spoon-fed by any rescuer, without our

taking an active and cooperative cognitive or practical role in our rescue. In any case, we will have to face the question of whether our available evidence, in conjunction with our best interest, supports our passively waiting. We might find that passively waiting would be irresponsible of us.

Option 3: Leaping

We can throw caution to the wilderness wind, and leap onto a foot path, even in the absence of evidence in favor of success (that is, eventual safety) in taking that path. We might conveniently pick a familiar path, one that is well-trodden, widely approved of, and historically dignified in the eyes of our peer group or doxastic community. Indeed, our taking this path could amount to an embraced “form of life” or a virtual social institution among our lost peers, including those who have jumped onto it before us. Of course, we would not presume to recommend this path as supported by conclusive evidence or even significant evidence of its success, but we do not therefore shrink back. Instead, we gladly leap onto this path, in keeping with the familiar practices of our wilderness forebears and contemporaries. On this option, we are practical *fideists* about a rescuer, because we proceed as if conclusive evidence is not available or even needed in support of either a rescuer or our adopted plan for being found by a rescuer. Eventually, we will have to face the natural question of whether our leaping amounts to anything more than wishful thinking on our part. A definite problem, in any case, is that many of the available paths lead to dead ends (where *we*, too, are dead) rather than to safety. As a result, we should not take this option blithely.

Option 4: Discerning Evidence

We can tighten our belts, given our impending food shortage, and take a hard look at our available evidence for a way out of our dangerous wilderness predicament. This option

seeks an alternative to (1) despairing, (2) passively waiting, and (3) leaping, at least as an initial strategy. It takes two significantly different forms.

A. PURPOSE-NEUTRAL DISCERNING OF EVIDENCE. What appears to be an old directional map leading from somewhere to somewhere else emerges from a pile of clutter near the ham radio. The origin and destination points on the map are far from obvious, but they seem not to involve a McDonald's restaurant or even a Starbuck's. *Purpose-neutral* discerning or characterizing of the apparent map would be free of identifying any purposes, or intentions, involving the map. It would identify, however, various *nonpurposive* features of the map, including geometric properties (such as shapes), constituent parts (such as opposing corners), and sensory features (such as textures). The natural sciences, unlike the social sciences and the humanities, typically settle for purpose-neutral discerning of available evidence. Such discerning can be very helpful as far as it goes, but it seems not to be exhaustive in all cases. It seems not always to offer full coverage of the actual evidence we have, particularly in connection with functional social artifacts, such as radios, telephones, computers, and MP3 players. In any case, we will need to ask how this very restrictive approach comports with our actual available evidence of the world around us and within us. We would suffer harm, of course, by omitting crucial evidence of a rescuer.

B. TELIC DISCERNING OF EVIDENCE. We sometimes can discern available evidence in terms of relevant *purposes* indicated in the evidence. For instance, regarding our apparent directional map, we can try to discern the cartographer's purpose in sketching the map as it actually is rather than as it would be as a result of a different purpose. Such discerning would be "telic" (from the Greek word, *telos*, for "purpose") in virtue of seeking a goal or (in Aristotelian language) a "final cause" in the relevant evidence. Accordingly,

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we might explore the map in terms of a directional purpose: that is, the cartographer's aim to direct readers from Point A (say, the miners' shack in Hells Canyon) to Point B (say, Baker City, OR, on the Old Oregon Trail). We therefore can imagine that the main purpose of the cartographer and her map is to lead lost people to safety.

It may be difficult for us sometimes to confirm the reality of a purpose indicated by evidence, but in telic discerning we would be attentive to this prospect, and we would be willing to explore any evidence for the purpose in question. In doing so, we would move beyond the immediate concerns of the natural sciences, but this would not necessarily be a cognitive deficiency at all. In fact, our available evidence could call for our attending to purposive considerations for the sake of *accurate* comprehensive treatment of our evidence. The propriety of telic discerning therefore cannot be excluded as a matter of logical or cognitive principle. It remains as a logically and cognitively live option, and this will surprise no one who is not in the grips of a supposed monopoly by the natural sciences.

Telic discerning of evidence takes two main forms: *direct* and *indirect*. Direct telic discerning identifies certain evidence as inherently and directly purposive and thus immediately indicative of a personal agent. In contrast, indirect telic discerning identifies certain evidence as extrinsically and indirectly purposive and thus inferentially indicative of a personal agent. Much of so-called "natural theology" offers (whether accurately or inaccurately) indirect telic discerning of certain evidence, characteristically by inference to the divine reality of (a) a purposive designer of nature, (b) an intentional first cause of observed contingent events, (c) a personal ground of moral values, or (d) a purposive basis of reflective consciousness. Questions of accuracy aside, such natural theology seeks rationally to identify divine reality indirectly, inferentially, and discursively, and thus uses distinctive premises to infer a conclusion in a natural-theological argument of one form or another. It

does not offer, however, evidence as inherently purposive in the way that direct telic discerning does.

The direct form of telic discerning finds purposive reality indicated directly in some evidence. For instance, it identifies intentional communication in some evidence without an intermediary, particularly such communication as an invitation, a call, a command, or a challenge. If human conscience could be a means of such communication, at least under some circumstances, then direct telic discerning could look in conscience for noninferential evidence of intentional communication, even from God. We shall consider this prospect in Chapter 4, in connection with a position called *volitional theism*. It promises to underwrite some important theological knowledge without the unduly abstract and suspect baggage that burdens much natural theology.

We can use the presence of the ham radio in the miners' shack to illustrate the distinction between purpose-neutral discerning and telic discerning. Hoping against hope that a needed rescuer is accessible, we turn on the radio and scan some easily located regional frequencies. Surprisingly, we vaguely detect an apparent voice that evidently is calling to us while breaking up in crackling static. Purpose-neutral discerning would attend to various physical features of this intriguing radio transmission: its volume, its temporal length, its auditory sharpness, and so on. Such features, of course, are important and even physically measurable, but they do not include what a person *intends to communicate* in a radio transmission. They are, after all, purpose-neutral, and therefore do not include or entail purposes.

Telic discerning, in contrast with purpose-neutral discerning, would consider any evidence of an *intended* communication via the ham radio. As a result, it would attend to the radio in the light of what (primarily) it was intended to convey: intentional communication among purposive agents. Indeed, the very notion of a ham radio (functionally characterized) involves the idea of such purposive communication. Accordingly, if we dispense with the notion of purpose

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(as even possibly represented in evidence), we put the very notion of a ham radio at risk. Typical goal-oriented explanation in the social sciences, in the humanities, and in nonacademic contexts will then disappear as well. As a result, our cognitive and practical lives will suffer drastically, in being limited to nonpurposive explanations, say from the natural sciences. This lesson applies likewise to our predicament in Hells Canyon. Our inanimate surroundings, although beautiful and highly structured in many ways (and ugly and seemingly chaotic in other ways), will not by themselves guide us to safety, given that we need intentional guidance. The corresponding purpose-neutral discerning of our evidence will evidently share that inadequacy.

Telic discerning inquires about the reality of purposes or intentions, and therefore exceeds not only inquiry about inanimate physical objects, circumstances, processes, or events, but also inquiry about abstract entities, such as properties, sets, or propositions. Telic discerning includes inquiry about goal-directed, intentional actions, and not just inanimate things or happenings. Clearly, we cannot plausibly assume at the start of inquiry that reality is devoid of purposes and intentional actions. Nothing in logic or in the notion of reality or even in science precludes the reality of either purposes or intentional actions. Of course, one might fervently embrace an austere ontology that, in keeping with an extreme, eliminative version of materialism, excludes the reality of purposes, but any such ontology would be logically optional, and not logically required. In addition, any such ontology would invite assessment of its accuracy on the basis of the actual evidence available to us. In the absence of such assessment, it would risk becoming a dogmatic ideology that seems as cognitively arbitrary as any other such ideology.

The evidence available to us in everyday human-to-human interactions certainly appears to support the reality of purposes and of resulting intentional actions. Frequently, it seems, humans set goals, identify means to achieve those