

Natural Theology and the Evidence for God

Reply to Harold Netland,
Charles Taliaferro, and Kate Waidler

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Thanks to Harold Netland, Charles Taliaferro, and Kate Waidler for their earnest attempts to salvage a role for natural theology.¹ I appreciate their perceptive and kind reflections on my position in religious epistemology, which forgoes traditional natural theology and mere spectator evidence of God. I'll try to clarify the basis of our differences in the very limited space available to me.

The God Worthy of Worship

My account begins with the idea (but *not* the reality, to avoid begging the question) of a God worthy of worship. This is a morally loaded idea, given that it requires self-sufficient moral perfection in a titleholder, and not just moral decency or unmatched power. In being morally perfect, God would have a demanding job-description toward humans, and therefore would be very different from the god of deism and arguably even the god of the philosophers and the mere theists, not to mention the various other lesser gods in circulation.

My robust notion of worthiness of worship, involving a notion of self-sufficient moral perfection, does very important work in distinguishing good from bad candidates for the title "God." It also saves us from begging important questions against proponents of gods other than the true God, and from starting with a controversial Christian assumption. Robust notions of moral perfection and worthiness of worship do not depend on Christian the-

ABSTRACT:

1. See Katharyn D. Waidler, "Volitional Evidence for God," *Philosophia Christi* 14 (2012): 275–84; Charles Taliaferro, "The Evidence for Paul Moser," *Philosophia Christi* 14 (2012): 285–9; Harold Netland, "If 'Personifying Evidence' Is the Answer, What Is the Question? A Response to Paul Moser," *Philosophia Christi* 14 (2012): 291–304.

ology at all. (Even atheists could adopt them.) These notions, however, do not conform to the common human tendency to set the bar too low for the title “God.” The latter tendency is part of the larger human practice to characterize God in our own imperfect image.

A morally perfect God, by title, would have to seek what is morally and spiritually best for humans, and this would include seeking the (noncoerced) deliverance of humans from their morally and spiritually defective ways in alienation from God. If God coerced vital human decisions, human agency would be extinguished or degraded, and the divine deliverance of *agents* would suffer accordingly. Humans, then, can reject and disregard evidence for God, and they often do. Accordingly, the evidence for God does not depend for its existence on humans’ accepting it; likewise, God’s commands do not depend on humans’ acknowledging or obeying them.

Seeking what is morally and spiritually best for humans, God would come with a direct challenge for us, at least if we are suitably receptive, and this would include a *de re* personal intervention and a corresponding command by God. (More accurately, the intervention would be *de te*, owing to its I-*Thou* character.) If such a divine coming to humans is omitted, God would fall short of seeking what is morally and spiritually best for us and therefore would fail to be God. God, however, would want humans to know *God*, and not just information about God. If God offered mere *de dicto* information, God would neglect the human need for engaged, *de re* moral transformation and hence be morally imperfect. Proponents of traditional natural theology typically overlook this consideration. The redemption of humans calls for God’s role as an intentional guide who meets, instructs, leads, and empowers humans, even when arguments fall short.

Looking for actual titleholders of “God,” we find that the viable candidates form a very short list, but that the Jewish-Christian God reportedly comes to humans in the twofold manner suggested. This coming is immortalized in the founding message of the earliest Jesus movement: “The Kingdom of God has drawn near. Turn, and trust in this Good News” (Mark 1:15 (my translation)). The claim that God’s Kingdom has drawn near, via Jesus Christ, is equivalent to the claim that God has shown up *de re* among humans. In addition, the charge to turn and to trust in this Good News is equivalent to a *command* to yield to God’s redemptive will. The reported purpose of the message is to redeem humans, to bring about what is morally and spiritually best for them, in direct life with God, not just in thoughts about God. As a result, there is a desired *de re* component in this message, going beyond merely *de dicto* informational content.

Perhaps the Christian message in question is just a fairy tale or merely a story for our easy comfort against fear. Perhaps it is, as many philosophers suggest, but perhaps it is not, as *The Evidence for God* contends. Many philosophers shrug off the message as seriously misguided or at best undecided-

able. In contrast, many others tighten their belts and launch natural theology, a strictly philosophical *de dicto* case for the God in question. One easily can relate to this urge, qua philosopher (as the medievals would say), but it may be premature and even dangerous. I submit that it is indeed.

The Evidence for God uses talk of “natural theology” in a restricted manner, to concern (and to challenge) the traditional philosophical arguments for God, particularly, cosmological, teleological, and ontological arguments. I do not, however, include in natural theology all cases for God from religious experience; in fact, the book offers one such case, if a neglected case from salient interventions of *agapē* in human experience. Romans 5:5 summarizes the book’s account, because it offers the experienced pouring out of divine *agapē* in receptive human persons as the cognitive foundation for hope and faith in God. (Arguably, then, Paul was a foundationalist about knowledge of God, although most commentators fail to understand his distinctive *agapē*-oriented epistemology; for details, see *The Evidence for God*, chapter 4, and my *The Severity of God*.²) We should note well that Paul finds the ground of human hope and faith in God in God’s self-manifesting *agapē*, and *not* in any natural theology added to this self-manifestation from God.

Suppose that the spectator evidence of natural theology makes no demand on the human will to yield to God’s will, and involves only *de dicto*, and not *de re*, content regarding God. (This captures the core of spectator evidence as I understand it.) If one proceeds with just such evidence, the book contends, one will fall short of evidence for a God worthy of worship. In that case, one will lack evidence for a *de re* personal intervention by God and for a corresponding command from God. Accordingly, one will lack evidence for the (Jewish-Christian) God worthy of worship, even if one has evidence for the god of deism, the god of the philosophers, or some other lesser god. It is no surprise, then, that contemporary debates over the arguments of natural theology rarely, if ever, get around to the crucial redemptive (including *agapeic*) features suited to a God worthy of worship. Here is the real danger of natural theology: it leaves us in an optional intellectual sideshow, without pointing us to the powerfully experienced Good News characteristic of the God worthy of worship.

Harold, Charles, and Kate worry in unison that some kind of natural theology is needed for an adequate case for the Christian God. Specifically, Charles and Kate suggest that some natural theology must serve *prior* to a person’s willingness to consider receiving a direct volitional challenge from God. Charles writes: “my broader point is that the assessment of transformation and the encounter with God takes place against a whole backdrop of philosophical assumptions. If your worldview rules out the existence of God

2. Moser, *The Evidence for God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); *The Severity of God* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

. . . no amount of appearances of . . . God will change your mind.”³ Kate remarks in a similar vein: “it seems that some sort of knowledge of God *as a morally perfect being*, that is, one whose aim is to bring about the best for a human being, *precedes* one’s willingness to accept God’s authoritative call or even to recognize it as such.”⁴

I submit that *de re* experience and evidence of God can undermine worldviews in virtue of supplying defeaters, particularly undefeated defeaters. God, then, would not have to wait for one to deliberate on and change one’s worldview by *independent*, natural theological evidence. In addition, God could present both *de re* evidence of God’s moral character and personal assurance of God’s moral perfection without the arguments of natural theology. Consider Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in relation to the intervening God, Yahweh. They did not have to wait for Plato, Aristotle, or Anselm to develop natural theology as a means to their knowledge of God, and their knowledge of God was existentially and redemptively significant. God provided the needed evidence directly, or so one could argue abductively, if my account holds. Accordingly, merely *de dicto* natural theology is dispensable for knowledge of God, even if it happens to have some *psychological* value for some people in some situations. It is doubtful, then, that the spectator knowledge of natural theology is needed as a preliminary or an accompaniment to human knowledge of God.

Harold finds a need for natural theology in *answering certain questions* stemming from the diversity of religious beliefs, including atheistic beliefs. In particular, he asks why one should accept “the claims of Christian theism as true” in the face of “widespread religious diversity and disagreement.”⁵ It is not clear what sense of “should” is at work here, but we do get one requirement: “experience of the transformative gift [from God] could be evidence for God only if the subject were aware that God is the giver of the gift.”⁶ This requirement, I submit, is false.

Awareness *that* God is the giver is *de dicto*, that is, propositional, whereas *de re* awareness *of* God is not; nor does the latter awareness require the former.⁷ Correspondingly, one’s *having* conclusive evidence of God does not entail one’s having a propositional answer to a question about God or any alternative to God. It would be a fatal kind of level-confusion to suggest otherwise: a confusion of the conditions for one’s *having* evidence and the conditions for one’s *showing, giving, or presenting* evidence in answer to a question or challenge. That confusion makes one’s having evidence overly intellectual, and invites the infamous epistemic regress problem. A theory

3. Taliaferro, “The Evidence for Paul Moser,” 288.

4. Waidler, “Volitional Evidence for God,” 278.

5. Netland, “If ‘Personifying Evidence’ Is the Answer, What Is the Question?,” 299.

6. *Ibid.*, 303.

7. My book, *Knowledge and Evidence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) labored this kind of distinction and its crucial role in epistemology.

falls prey to that defect whenever the conditions for answering questions become conditions for having evidence. Answers to questions are propositional; evidence need not be, and foundational evidence is not (on which see *Knowledge and Evidence*).

When we ask about “answering questions,” we typically are concerned with *showing*, *giving*, or *presenting* evidence, in addition to offering true answers. The latter concern is much more intellectual and reflective than the more basic conditions for one’s having evidence. When we take up the reflective concern, we must, I contend, go abductive, invoking considerations about our best available explanation of the relevant phenomena needing explanation. This line emerges in *The Elusive God* and in *The Evidence for God* (as well as in *Knowledge and Evidence*), and I know of no better line. In addition, I argue in *The Elusive God* that the proposed volitional theism fares remarkably well by this plausible standard, even against skeptics, without relying on the arguments of natural theology. In this connection, it is a serious mistake to assume that mere doxastic diversity or disagreement, even among one’s peers, yields a defeater for the proposed theism. Mere disagreement is akin to mere belief in lacking the evidential status to generate an epistemic defeater. Otherwise, we could produce defeaters at will, but that would rob evidence of its distinctive status.

Some inquirers might have misgivings about the proposed *de re* salient evidence in human experience of divine *agapē*, on the ground that we humans are racked with selfishness and pride. I have no brief against the reality of our plight in this regard, but it can be a distorting human overlay on God’s gift of *agapē*, freely added by imperfect humans. Life with God, therefore, could include a human struggle to subtract this overlay for the sake of revealing the underlying gift received. God honors freedom in this connection, but it still could be true that “if you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive you” (Matt. 6:15). God allows for freedom not only to receive his gift, but also to reject it, even after receiving it. Such is the gravity of life with God.

A truly redemptive God would seek to hold together *de re* and *de dicto* evidence of God, for the sake of human moral transformation toward divine *agapē* and forgiveness, even for one’s enemies. That is, God would aim to combine (in reality, but not conceptually) humans’ *knowing God* with humans’ knowing that God exists. As a result, reflection on God would be offered not as a spectator sport, but instead as a life-forming challenge from the morally authoritative presence of God. Accordingly, God does not have to postpone Gethsemane and its needed benefits until the philosophical theologians weigh in, and for this we should always be grateful, given the esoteric and indecisive nature of typical natural theology. A redemptive God would offer a new, experienced dimension of volitional companionship with God that overcomes the endless doubts prompted by much philosophy of reli-

gion. This is part of what Paul calls God's "new creation" and contrasts with "knowing according to flesh" (see 2 Cor. 5:16–17). Perhaps, unfortunately, many humans prefer endless debate as an alternative to God's new creation.

Romans 1 in Context

I break rank with most friends of natural theology, because I do not see how the created world *by itself* is evidence for a personal God worthy of worship. In addition, I do not find Paul claiming in Romans 1 that creation *by itself* is such evidence. Instead, Paul claims that "God showed them" about God's reality via creation, but not via creation *alone*. Accordingly, we do not find a natural theological argument here or elsewhere in Paul. God still must show people God and call people to God, because creation does not do this by itself, even if God sometimes uses it as a medium. In that case, natural theological arguments from creation alone will not deliver a personal God worthy of worship. By analogy, my cellphone by itself (not a smartphone) fails to give you evidence of me, as a personal agent, even though I can use it (as a medium) to give you such evidence. Chapter 1 of Romans invites this distinction, even though most interpreters miss it, as do most philosophers of religion.

Clearly, the First Cause/Designer of natural theology could be downright evil, but God, by normative title, could not be. So, I want to avoid any inference from the former to the latter. In fact, I have suggested that one cannot get there (to a God worthy of worship) from here (the merely natural premises of the traditional empirical arguments). The heart of the problem is that one cannot get from here to God's perfect personal moral character and hence cannot get to a God worthy of worship. Arguably, we have to learn that God is the Creator by God's *de re* testimony, after we learn of God's moral character in Gethsemane. Analogously, ancient Hebraic knowledge of God as the Creator arguably arose after knowledge of God as the Exodus rescuer. I see no way to argue otherwise without inviting big problems of the kind facing the arguments of traditional natural theology (on which, see chapter 3 of *The Evidence for God*).

Am I proposing some kind of apologetics that banishes philosophy altogether? No, if the philosophy in question is open, at least in principle, to *de re* volitional engagement with God. (Not all philosophy, however, is open in this way; philosophy can be stubbornly narrow in excluding the God who intervenes directly and redemptively.) Philosophy done under divine authority differs from philosophy not done under such authority. A big difference is in the purpose of doing philosophy and the resulting focus. Philosophy done under divine authority includes redemptive Good News urgently needed by humans, and philosophers should be passionate about this Good News. This story is told in chapter 4 of *The Elusive God* and in my *The Severity of God*,

but I cannot repeat it here. I should mention, however, that postponing the Good News message for the sake of supposed philosophical preliminaries often leaves philosophers languishing indefinitely in such preliminaries. We see this when philosophers of religion never get around to honest reflection on the vital existential and moral struggle that is human faith in God. Perhaps we do not need to languish there, after all. At least, this is what *The Evidence for God* contends, in its attempt to redirect epistemology regarding God's reality. The remaining question is whether we are *willing* to be redirected toward God, rather than mere arguments about God. This question remains for each of us, and bears directly on our wills in the presence of God.