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Paul K. Moser. *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Like many other philosophers writing today, Paul Moser believes that God's existence is *hidden*, at least for some people at some times, meaning that God's existence "fails to be not only obvious but also beyond cognitively reasonable doubt" (p. 1). In this book, Moser presents an original approach to divine hiddenness and explores the implications of this approach for religious epistemology. He argues not only that hiddenness fails to rationally support a skeptical attitude to divine reality but also that a proper understanding of divine purposes in self-revelation should lead us to *expect* hiddenness. The book's central thesis is that we should expect conclusive evidence of God's existence to be *purposively available* – that is, available in a way that "accommodates the distinctive purposes of a perfectly loving God." Such purposes, says Moser, "would aim noncoercively but authoritatively to transform human purposes to agree with divine purposes, despite human resistance of various and sundry sorts" (p. 2). On Moser's account, then, God is hidden from some people at some times because such people, through their unwillingness to be transformed by God, are not well-positioned to receive (or respond to) purposively available evidence of divine reality. According to Moser, the book marks "a Copernican Revolution in cognitive matters about God's existence" (p. 4), necessitating what he calls a seismic shift in the epistemology of religious belief. At the heart of this shift is the importance placed on the human will, over and above the human intellect, in receiving and responding to conclusive evidence of divine reality. The aim in what follows is to provide a brief summary of the book's contents, and then to try and anticipate some of the concerns that some readers may have.

In chapter one, Moser makes an important distinction between what he terms 'spectator evidence' and 'perfectly authoritative evidence'. The former is "evidence pointing to some truth but *not* demanding that its recipients yield their wills to (the will of) the source of the evidence" (p. 46). The latter is evidence which does make such a demand. Moser argues that a perfectly loving God who is interested in establishing

genuinely redemptive relationships with human beings would forego spectator evidence of God's existence (which, even if conclusive, would be merely academic and would fail to challenge us in the relevant and appropriate way(s)). Instead, such a God would reveal himself purposively and authoritatively (so as to challenge our wills), in a manner that is "akin to evidence from conscience" (p. 62). The absence of a person's experience of this evidence in no way makes skepticism normative for others, says Moser, since it may be that this absence is due to the person's unwillingness to receive such purposively available authoritative evidence (hereafter PAAE).

Chapter two develops in more detail the notion of PAAE and explores the reasons for which a perfectly loving God might choose to remain hidden (at least from some people at some times). A non-exhaustive list of these reasons, Moser suggests, includes: "(a) to teach people to yearn for . . . personal fellowship with God, (b) to strengthen grateful trust in God . . . , (c) to remove human complacency toward God . . . , (d) to shatter destructively prideful human self-reliance, and (e) to prevent people who aren't ready for fellowship with God from explicitly rejecting God" (p. 107). The third chapter explores God's invitation to set aside our selfishness and be willingly transformed so that we love others (even enemies) in a way that more closely approximates the divine unselfish love for us exemplified so powerfully in Jesus. Of particular interest in this chapter is Moser's discussion of the underlying epistemology of his account of our knowing God on the basis of PAAE. Moser argues that "God's intervening Spirit . . . witnesses to, and thus confirms, God's reality *directly* for willingly receptive people at God's chosen time" and that this "yields firsthand foundational (that is, noninferential) evidence and knowledge of God's reality" (p. 150). Interestingly, readers may think at this point that Moser is offering us Reformed Epistemology for evidentialists (with the concept of evidence broadened to include PAAE). This characterization seems accurate enough. Moser seems to agree with reformed epistemologists that belief in God can be 'properly basic'; the main difference is that Moser wants to characterize his view as evidentialist. What is truly surprising is that Moser mentions "reformed epistemology" (and Plantinga) in only one paragraph, in the final chapter.

Chapter four discusses the revolutionary changes that would take place in philosophy if more philosophers prepared themselves to receive PAAE

and let it transform their lives, in general, and their intellectual pursuits, in particular. “[P]hilosophers,” says Moser, “should actually participate eagerly in the church community of God’s people, as philosophical *servants* rather than self-avowed intellectual superiors, to identify its philosophical needs for the sake of the Good News and then to serve those needs in redemptive love” (p. 232). The last chapter expands on how the epistemological shift argued for in the previous chapters (i.e. the shift from spectator evidence to PAEE) is beneficial to *all* humans, since it puts us in a better position to address two of our most fundamental problems: destructive selfishness and impending death. An appendix to the book attempts to dispel any remaining skeptical worries.

The Elusive God is an interesting, insightful, and at times highly polemical work which provides an original theistic voice in the ongoing conversation about divine hiddenness. Moser’s defense of the claim that cognitive issues related to God’s existence are significantly affected by whether we humans are willing to be “transformed toward God’s moral character of perfect love . . . , thereby obediently yielding our wills to God’s authoritative will” (p. 119) represents the book’s most important contribution to contemporary religious epistemology. However, controversy will likely surround the notion that this contribution amounts to (or necessitates) a “Copernican Revolution in cognitive matters about God’s existence,” for reasons that we’ll see below.

Moser thinks that an epistemology of PAEE is the only game in town once the relevant aims of a perfectly loving God (including the aim of challenging humans to yield their wills to divine purposes) are fully appreciated and accounted for. He launches critiques against other purportedly viable contenders such as fideism, natural theology, and a religious epistemology centering on ‘numinous’ or mystical experiences (Plantinga’s reformed epistemology is conspicuously absent from the list). Moser argues that fideism is an epistemological non-starter, since it “implausibly entails that theistic commitment need not rest for its cognitive status on supporting evidence,” thus making theism “evidentially arbitrary and thus cognitively irrational” (p. 33, italics omitted). Mystical or numinous religious experiences are, says Moser, “not only unnecessary but also dangerous for experientially well-founded theistic belief,” since they divert attention from what would be the main aim of God in giving us self-revelation – namely, “the purportedly redemptive

manifestation of a divine authoritatively loving character worthy of worship and thus of obedient human submission” (p. 8). Moser’s aversion to this kind of epistemology of religious experience is linked to his distaste for the evidences of natural theology in that he finds both to be spectacular, disinterested, and even academic or trivial with respect to the transformative challenge God makes upon our wills. Moser faults traditional natural theology (with its focus on cosmological, teleological, and other arguments for God’s existence) and much recent work in the philosophy of religion for having “simply neglected [PAAE] for the sake of more comfortable, less challenging spectator evidence” (p. 53).

For Moser to make good on his advertisement of the book’s “Copernican Revolution,” he needs to defend two important claims:

(1) A perfectly loving God would offer only PAAE to accomplish God’s aims in self-revelation

and

(2) Other, rival religious epistemologies offer at best only spectator evidence

But readers may find ambiguity in Moser’s position with respect to whether he wants to defend (1) or:

(1*) A perfectly loving God would offer *primarily* PAAE to accomplish God’s aims in self-revelation.

(1*) may be the easier of the two to defend but would, of course, somewhat weaken Moser’s position (since defenders of rival religious epistemologies could agree with (1*)). In any case, many readers familiar with the Jewish and Christian religious traditions will note that there is warrant (in both Scripture and theology) for thinking that God employs many resources – particularly the natural order – in self-revelation. Now Moser briefly discusses St. Paul’s remarks to this effect in Romans 1:19-20, and says (p. 48) that the evidence mentioned in this passage yields only ‘casual knowledge’ that God exists (which would not be adequate to bring people to reconciliation with God). But many readers might find Moser’s remarks here puzzling. For, this looks like an admission that God’s existence may not be ‘hidden’ after all, whereas the main aim of the book is to offer an account of PAAE to explain why God is hidden (at least from some people at some times).

Concerning natural theology, Moser complains that “endless disputes about probabilities involving apparent design in biology or cosmology or

about the need for an inaugural cause behind any parade of contingent causes and effects” are “esoteric” and have “nothing directly at all to do with God’s inherent character of perfect authoritative love” (p. 136). He goes on to suggest that these arguments don’t convince anyone not already committed to certain theistic presuppositions. But of course, many philosophers won’t see the presence of intractable disagreement about an argument as an index of its evidential strength. Moreover, what is good for the goose is good for the gander. Moser cites selfish attitudes and willful resistance to setting aside one’s autonomy as reasons for why people do not receive (or if they receive, do not respond favorably to) PAAE. But for all we know, these same considerations explain why some people are not convinced by the arguments of natural theology.

Moser’s contention in (2), above (that rival religious epistemologies offer, at best, only spectator evidence), is far from obvious. For example, suppose someone (call him Bob) carefully considers anthropic, big-bang cosmological, and fine-tuning arguments which point to the universe having been delicately designed so as to support the eventual appearance of human life (the latter being either a special act of creation or the intended outcome of an evolutionary process whose requisite initial conditions were put in place by the designer). William Lane Craig and others have argued that such arguments pack with them evidence that the designer is a personal Agent. Now suppose Bob finds himself convinced in this way that a very powerful, very knowledgeable, and personal Agent intended his (and other humans’) existence. This evidence may well suggest to Bob questions such as whether there are more specific purposes that this Agent has concerning him, and whether this Agent has revealed himself in any other, more specific way. In considering such questions, Bob may already be yielding (or at least beginning to yield) his will to his Creator. (Incidentally, something similar to this scenario is empirically confirmed in the faith journeys of many noted thinkers). So it is not clear that natural theology, for example, amounts to no more than spectator evidence. Readers might also wonder (a) why a numinous experience couldn’t have as its object a demanding, authoritative God (and thus involve PAAE), and (b) why Moser, in claiming that only his religious epistemology accounts for PAAE, seems to ignore all of Plantinga’s work on the role of the will in religious belief formation (see

Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford University Press, 2000), especially chapter seven).

It should be briefly pointed out that in chapter 3, Moser argues for what he calls the 'divine manifest-offering approach to atonement' while launching an in-house critique against "some of the Christian tradition" concerning the historically popular 'penal substitution' theory (which claims that God punished the sinless Jesus in place of sinful humanity – a claim Moser finds "morally distorted" (p. 174)). Whatever readers may think about the success or failure of this polemic, it is not germane to the main argument of the book, since Moser's account of PAAE seems consistent with both the manifest-offering and the penal substitution approaches to atonement.

Finally, with all due apologies to Moser, the book is incredibly verbose. In the 278 pages of text, the reader will be struck with the realization that some of the same phrases keep popping up over and over again, as do some of the same claims (often without additional argumentation). All things considered, it seems reasonable to suppose that the book could have been condensed to around 150 pages. For readers familiar with Moser's previous, crisply argued work, this will seem an odd stylistic development. That said, the essential points Moser presents in *The Elusive God* make an important contribution to the epistemology of religious belief and should be taken seriously by present and future epistemologists and philosophers of religion.