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How Not to Defend Natural Theology: Reply to Woldeyohannes

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Abstract: Doubt is definitely appropriate when one advocates the evidential value of “arguments of natural theology” without presenting any such argument for careful assessment. Tedla Woldeyohannes (hereafter TW) advocates in just this overly protective manner. According to this reply, such advocacy must yield to the presentation and assessment of an actual argument of natural theology. Otherwise, it is too easy for one’s high hopes for natural theology, coupled with social pressure from one’s peers and teachers, to get the best of one by neglecting logical and evidential deficiencies in arguments. This reply shows that TW does not avoid some serious misgivings about arguments of natural theology, and that therefore his defense fails.

I. A Bad Historical Analogy

I have noted, in various essays, that proponents of arguments of natural theology will not find any support for their arguments in the Old Testament or in the New Testament. Not even Romans 1, the go-to chapter for some friends of natural theology, offers an argument of natural theology. In particular, Paul does not infer a conclusion about God’s existence from premises limited to natural knowledge; so, Paul does not offer an argument of natural theology. The latter empirical point about Paul is transparent, and should not prompt controversy.

TW offers the following reply, including an analogy from contemporary Africa to ancient Israel:

In contexts such as Africa, especially for those who have never encountered the Western secular influence, presentation of theistic arguments in the course of teaching, and defending the Good News is of little or no use. I submit that the context of biblical writers was not much different than the context in Africa in our own time. Consequently, there was no reason for biblical writers to use theistic arguments when they were not dealing with atheists, agnostics, and

skeptics the way Christian philosophers and academics are dealing with today. Therefore, making the way biblical writers communicated their message normative for contemporary Christian philosophers and other academics is questionable at best. We may conclude that doing away with natural theology, as Moser recommends, based on, among other reasons, the claim that Jesus and the New Testament writers did not use arguments of natural theology is unjustified.¹

TW adds the following about Africa: “Take the African continent as a context for presenting, teaching, and defending the Gospel. Note that for those who already believe in God or gods [polytheists] there is no need to use philosophical arguments to show that God exists or gods exist.”

Contrary to TW’s claim, I have not recommended “doing away with natural theology,” given that I myself (as we shall see) have proposed a distinctive first-person perspective argument of natural theology. Instead, I have recommended doing away with all of the *bad arguments* of natural theology, specifically those that fail to yield, in a cogent manner, the conclusion that *God* exists. In addition, we should reject TW’s proposed analogy between contemporary Africa and ancient Israel. The disanalogy should be clear if we attend to actual history, and we must attend to actual historical evidence to assess such a historical analogy. Unfortunately, TW does not consider any historical evidence of the role of skepticism in ancient Israel, and this is a serious oversight. Incidentally, I recommend that TW not comment on “the African continent” as a whole, given that Egypt, for instance, is part of the continent. Alexandria, Egypt was founded by Alexander the Great around 330 B.C., and it became a center for Hellenistic thought and civilization in northern Africa; accordingly, many of its citizens have interacted with the “atheists, agnostics, and skeptics” involved in ancient Greek thought.

Our historical evidence indicates that many people in ancient Israel interacted with “atheists, agnostics, and skeptics,” partly owing to the influence of skeptical philosophical ideas (and their proponents) from Greece and Rome. For instance, Robert H. Pfeiffer has remarked as follows: “It is hardly conceivable that Ecclesiastes would have lost his assurance in the validity of the Jewish faith, worship, and rule of conduct, unless he had come into contact, more or less indirectly, with Greek thought.” He proposes that some of the thoughts of Ecclesiastes are “distant echoes of some of the daring speculations

¹ Tedla G. Woldeyohannes, “Given the Evidence, Natural Theology is Here to Stay!” 4-5 (<http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=203&mode=detail>).

of Greek philosophers.”² More generally, our historical evidence shows that ancient Israel did not live in a cultural or intellectual vacuum. By the time that Jesus came on the scene, Israel had been influenced by cultural and intellectual trends from Greece and Rome. Perhaps the most striking evidence for this historical fact is that the Jewish writers of the New Testament wrote their letters and gospels in Greek, and not in Hebrew or Aramaic. At a minimum, the bearing of Greek thinkers and thinking on at least first-century Israel yields a sharp contrast, even a disanalogy, between the earliest Jewish Christians and many people in parts of contemporary Africa, with regard to skepticism.

In examining “the birth of skepticism in ancient Israel,” James L. Crenshaw contends that in ancient Israel “skeptics came upon the stage long before Job and Ecclesiastes were written.”³ He adds that “Israel’s skeptics severed a vital nerve at two distinct junctures. They denied God’s goodness if not the very existence of the Divine, and they portrayed men and women as powerless to acquire essential truth.”⁴ Aside from the details about exactly when skepticism arose in ancient Israel, we do have clear evidence that many first-century Jewish Christians were aware of the reality of skeptics. For instance, according to Psalm 14:1 and Psalm 53:1: “Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God’” (NRSV here and in following biblical translations). Similarly, Psalm 10:4 announces: “In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, ‘God will not seek it out’; all their thoughts are, ‘There is no God.’” Ancient Jewish and Christian readers of the Psalms, then, were well aware of people who denied the existence of God.

We know from the New Testament that Jesus ministered in the Decapolis, the area of ten cities in Judea and Syria that were centers of Greek and Roman culture (see Mk. 5:1–10, 20, 7:31). In addition, we know from the New Testament that Jesus communicated (perhaps in Greek) with Pontius

² Robert H. Pfeiffer, “The Peculiar Skepticism of Ecclesiastes.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 53 (1954), 109. On the relevant Greek skeptical thought, see Jonathan Barnes, *The Toils of Scepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Mi-Kyoung Lee, *Epistemology after Protagoras* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), Harald Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), and Richard Bett, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³ James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster Press, 2010), p. 234. See also Crenshaw, “The Birth of Skepticism in Ancient Israel,” in James L. Crenshaw and Samuel Sandmel, eds., *Divine Helmsman: Studies on God’s Control of Human Events* (New York: KTAV, 1980), pp. 1–19. For further relevant discussion, see Katharine J. Dell, *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), and Harold W. Attridge, “The Philosophical Critique of Religion under the Early Empire,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt II*, 16 (1978), 45–78.

⁴ Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 3rd ed., p. 242.

Pilate, a Roman governor or prefect of Judea, who presided at his trial. These were occasions for Jesus to interact with people with inclinations toward skepticism of various sorts, including skepticism about God. Pilate, in particular, is notorious for his question to Jesus, “What is truth?” (Jn. 18:38). It is significant, however, that nowhere in his ministry does Jesus offer an argument from natural theology to convince the likely skeptics in his audiences. It would be implausible to assume that his audiences were always free of skeptics, given the influence of Greek culture and thought.

We know from the New Testament that many of the first-century disciples of Jesus ministered in the Jewish diaspora, including in centers of Greek and Roman culture and thought, such as Athens, Corinth, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Colossae, and Philippi. TW’s analogy suggests that these disciples did not encounter skeptics about the existence of God. This suggestion, however, is altogether implausible, and appears to be motivated only by his desire to try to explain the absence of arguments of natural theology in the New Testament. He suggests that everyone in the audiences of the disciples already believed that God exists, and therefore that the arguments of natural theology would be superfluous. This cannot be right, because even if the audiences of the earliest disciples consisted largely of theists, these theists would not automatically have believed on the basis of adequate evidence that God as Creator exists. Most likely many would have believed for the wrong reasons that God exists, and (more to the point) would have omitted belief that God is the transcendent creator of the universe. So, given TW’s perspective, he should expect the disciples to have used the arguments of natural theology to supply good reasons for the theism in circulation and to establish God as transcendent creator. Of course, this expectation is not met. As a result, his argument suffers from a big hole.

The apostle Paul, undeniably, was a highly effective leader in the earliest Christian mission to the Gentiles. According to Acts 17:18, he conversed with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens. The Epicureans were atomic materialists, in the spirit of Democritus, and therefore were not theists in any manner akin to Jewish or Christian theism. We may assume, then, that some of the philosophers encountered by Paul in Athens were atheists, for all practical purposes. He does not respond to them with arguments of natural theology, even though neither the Epicureans nor the Stoics acknowledged the creation of the world by a transcendent God. So, if TW is right about the arguments of natural theology as yielding knowledge of God as creator, Paul should have taken the opportunity to correct the Epicureans and Stoics by means of arguments of natural theology. There was a genuine need for correction, as Paul well knew, but he avoids using any argument of natural theology. I submit,

then, that Paul, like Jesus and his other earliest disciples, was not an advocate of arguments of natural theology.

TW's use of his Africa analogy suggests that the arguments of natural theology were merely superfluous in the earliest Christian preaching and teaching and therefore did not emerge in actual practice. We have seen that this is not so. The earliest disciples of Jesus confronted people, including Epicureans and Stoics, who did not acknowledge creation by a transcendent God. An argument establishing that God is a transcendent creator might therefore have been very helpful. The absence of such an argument of natural theology in the preaching, teaching, and writing of the earliest disciples is best explained by their not being convinced by any such argument. So, TW's proposed historical analogy fails. His recommendation that one "use *all* available evidence, including arguments of natural theology, when a Christian philosopher engages in the presentation, teaching, and defense of the Good News" demands a qualification regarding *only good* arguments of natural theology. So far as the evidence provided by TW goes, we have no evidence for a good argument of natural theology. Perhaps he chooses not to stick his neck out here owing to the trenchant criticisms in the literature of the arguments of natural theology. In particular, his mention of Richard Swinburne in passing will not carry the day, given the powerful criticisms of his use of simplicity in the literature.⁵

II. An Implausibly Narrow Goal for Natural Theology

TW has been unwilling to present and assess an argument of natural theology, but he does venture a comment on "the goal of arguments of natural theology," as follows:

I take it that the goal of arguments of natural theology is to establish that God *qua* Creator exists, which does not require establishing the existence of God *qua* Redeemer though orthodox Christianity is committed to the view that God *qua* Creator is God *qua* Redeemer. I take it that to construct an argument to show that God *qua* Creator exists is sufficient for the project of natural theology in the face of detractors who deny the existence of any transcendent supernatural being that is identical to God *qua* Creator. The Triune nature of God goes beyond general revelation,

⁵ See the relevant discussion in Michael Martin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), and Herman Philipse, *God in the Age of Science? A Critique of Religious Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

which is the focus of natural theology, and requires special revelation such as in the Bible and the Incarnation.⁶

It is unclear to me why TW introduces “the Triune nature of God” at all here. I have not demanded, or even suggested, that an argument of natural theology must establish that God is triune; nor do I recall anyone else demanding or suggesting this. In addition, it is unclear what exactly TW means by “establish” or “show” with regard to the view that God is creator. People mean different things by these slippery terms, and they should not be left unclear in an attempt to defend arguments of natural theology. Absence of precision here will entail absence of success in the purported defense.

TW continues his defense as follows:

... one of the reasons Moser thinks that arguments of natural theology fail is based on his claim that they do not yield a personal God worthy of worship or “these arguments fall short of the Christian God.” There are, at least, a couple ways to respond to Moser’s claims. First, ... it is crucial to identify the goal of the project of natural theology. Many practitioners of natural theology think that the goal of natural theology is to establish that generic theism is true, or generic theism is more probably true than its denial. Richard Swinburne is a case in point. Moser’s objection can succeed only if he targets a practitioner of natural theology who claims that natural theology is a project to prove the existence of the Christian God in the sense Moser claims.⁷

The concluding sentence of the quotation shows a serious misunderstanding of my objection to the standard arguments of natural theology. In *The Evidence for God* (chapter 3), I make it clear that my concern is not the Christian God but simply a personal God worthy of worship. TW commits a straw-man fallacy in bringing in the Christian God and the triune nature of God. The latter are not inherent to my argument in *The Evidence for God*.

TW’s proposed goal for natural theology “to establish that God *qua* Creator exists” is unduly narrow for the range of arguments of natural theology. Design and moral arguments for God’s existence, for instance, need not establish that “God *qua* Creator exists.” A design argument can focus on

⁶ Woldeyohannes, “Given the Evidence, Natural Theology is Here to Stay!” 13.

⁷ Ibid., 12-13

(accounting for) the apparent design in the world and allow a different argument to account for the *origin* of what (for instance, the material stuff that exhibits apparent design. By rough analogy, consider the role of Plato's Demiurge as the designer but *not* the creator of the physical world. In addition, a moral argument for God's existence can focus on what sustains moral values (purportedly God's character) without establishing that "God *qua* Creator exists." In particular, a moral argument can deny that God "creates" moral values, which arguably have no beginning. The big problem, however, is that TW offers no argument whatever to achieve his narrow goal for natural theology. This kind of intentional omission is not fair game in philosophy. If one aims to defend arguments of natural theology, one needs to present and to assess at least one such argument. Otherwise, one has chosen something like mere political or ideological advocacy over philosophical argument. So far as I can tell, TW has done just that.

TW tries to minimize the significance of disagreements about natural theology among Christians. He remarks: "Obviously, Christians do also *disagree* about the goal of natural theology, or how good arguments of natural theology are, etc., but their in-house disagreements are consequences of different views they hold about the goal of theistic arguments, among other things." This is not so. We might grant, if only for the sake of argument, the proposed narrow goal "to establish that God *qua* Creator exists." I have not found, however, any good argument, among the arguments of natural theology, that establishes that God is the Creator. If "God" is a title for a "personal God worthy of worship," as proposed in *The Evidence for God*, then we can ask *which* argument of natural theology establishes the existence of a personal God worthy of worship. In *The Evidence for God* and elsewhere⁸, I have raised doubts that the familiar arguments yield any such God, even if they yield some lesser god. Clearly, there is no conceptual connection between a first cause of the universe and a personal God worthy of worship, and it is similarly doubtful that there being a first cause makes it likely (in any widely accepted sense) that a personal God worthy of worship exists. TW has offered no reason to discount such doubts, and one cannot simply assume what needs careful argument here.

I have suggested that a proponent of arguments of natural theology should be able to explain why those arguments leave many philosophically capable truth-seekers unconvinced. TW offers the following response:

⁸ See Paul K. Moser, "God without Argument," in Corey Miller and Paul Gould, eds., *Is Faith in God Reasonable?* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2014), and Moser, *The Severity of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), chapter 3.

... [an] explanation why many shrewd skeptics, agnostics, and atheists do not move closer to theism or embrace the Good News is not because, as I take it, the arguments of natural theology are defective in some unique way but because the question of God's existence is not a purely intellectual issue and shrewd skeptics could reject God on non-intellectual grounds.⁹

Of course, shrewd skeptics *could* reject an argument of natural theology on non-intellectual grounds, but TW cannot leave this as a mere possibility. We need some kind of supporting evidence.

TW elaborates as follows:

... human inquirers can and do often handle evidence for God's existence in a way that could allow stability in their current life (cognitive or moral) by avoiding yielding their will to God so that they do not have to reorient their lives. Pointing out dead-ends about arguments involving God's existence can serve as an excuse for one to live one's life as if God does not exist and this I suggest can better explain why philosophical arguments about God face persistent resistance from wayward humans. This is a more plausible explanation, I submit, than Moser's explanation that theistic arguments are unconvincing for many theorists, including theists because they are not cogent.¹⁰

In TW's proposed explanation, then, the arguments of natural theology "face persistent resistance" because their critics desire "an excuse for one to live one's life as if God does not exist." This is an astonishing claim, and I know of nothing that plausibly speaks in its favor. Two obvious problems emerge. First, many sincere, educated *Christians* offer "persistent resistance" to the familiar argument of natural theology. (See, for instance, the quotation from Herman Bavinck in this paper's conclusion.) I count myself among them, for what it's worth. I presume that TW has no evidence to include them among people who seek "an excuse for one to live one's life as if God does not exist." If, however, he has such evidence, he will need to present it. Until he does, he should retract his ungrounded allegation. Second, many responsible criticisms of arguments of natural theology show no sign of resisting a

⁹ Woldeyohannes, "Given the Evidence, Natural Theology is Here to Stay!" 10

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

challenge from God on the direction of one's life. For instance, the literature includes a number of trenchant criticisms of the *kalam* and design arguments for God's existence, and these have no hint whatever of the kind of resistance to God that TW alleges.¹¹

TW introduces a principle he calls "Moser's Criterion" that may be put as follows:

MC. The familiar arguments of natural theology for God's existence should be not only logically sound, but also cogent for a wide audience, including shrewd agnostics.

He wonders whether my own argument for God's existence, in *The Elusive God* and *The Evidence for God*, "meets Moser's criterion in the same sense he requires the arguments of natural theology need to. That is, is his argument not only logically sound, but also cogent for a wide audience, including shrewd agnostics?" This question shows a misunderstanding of the distinctiveness of my proposed argument. My argument functions solely from a specific first-person perspective and therefore does not intend to deal with evidence now possessed by or readily available to all inquirers. In that key respect, it differs from the familiar arguments of natural theology, which are intended to rest on evidence readily available to all capable inquirers. So, I have not offered an argument that is intended to satisfy the second clause of the criterion in question. This should be no surprise, given that my argument is offered in the context of an account that accommodates God's evidential hiding and elusiveness relative to some people. I explicitly reject the view that God has provided to all inquirers the kind of static evidence characteristic of the familiar arguments of natural theology.¹² The volitionally sensitive evidence acknowledged by my account is very different from the evidence offered by the familiar arguments of natural theology. I have called the latter evidence

¹¹ See, for instance, Wes Morriston, "Must the Beginning of the Universe Have a Personal Cause? A Critical Examination of the Kalam Cosmological Argument," *Faith and Philosophy* 17 (2000), 149–69, and Elliott Sober, "The Design Argument," at: <http://sober.philosophy.wisc.edu/selected-papers#TOC-Intelligent-Design-and-Naturalism-v.-Supernaturalism>. (This site includes other papers by Sober critical of design arguments.) The probing criticisms from Morriston and Sober have nothing whatever to do with one's seeking to resist God's influence on the direction of one's life. They have everything to do with serious problems in the arguments on offer.

¹² For relevant discussion, see Paul Moser, *The Evidence for God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chapter 3, and Moser, *The Elusive God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), chapter 2.

“spectator evidence,” because it does not challenge the direction of an inquirer’s will relative to God.

TW expresses support for my positive epistemology that accommodates the importance of human volitional inclination in knowledge of God. We should note that if this positive approach is on the right track, we have no need for the dubious arguments of natural theology. Those arguments will then play no crucial role in human knowledge of God. Some may insist on some role for those arguments, after all, but we do well to attend to the following observation by Herman Bavinck on the so-called “proofs” of God’s existence from natural theology:

Even the term ‘proofs’ is infelicitous. The cosmological, teleological, and moral testimony to God is not a matter of logical, mathematical proof but belongs to the category of moral and religious truth. The proofs may augment faith, but they do not serve as its grounds. They are, rather, the consequences, the products of faith’s observation of the world. The proofs do not induce faith, and objections against them do not wreck it. They are, instead, testimonies by which God is able to strengthen already-given faith.¹³

If Bavinck is on the right track, we can begin to explain why I have never met a logically and philosophically capable inquirer who was convinced that God exists on the basis of the familiar arguments of natural theology.

I have found the arguments in question to divert attention from the kind of evidence appropriate to (and to be expected of) a personal God worthy of worship. In particular, they lead many Christian philosophers to be diverted from the crucial evidential significance of divine *agapē* (see Rom. 5:5), and to languish in abstract and esoteric issues that never bring one around to God’s unsurpassed *agapē* in Christ. The result is unfortunate indeed, epistemologically and spiritually.

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¹³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 2: God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004) p. 56. (Thanks to Chris Van Allsburg for this reference.) See also the duly careful discussion of natural theology in Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1989), chapters 3–4.