Review of "Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments"

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Book Review | *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments*

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The main argument in this book is that theistic natural signs lie at the core of the cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments for God’s existence, and that these signs make possible properly basic, non-inferential knowledge of God. Or, as C. Stephen Evans (a philosopher at Baylor University) puts it a bit more weakly, they provide prima facie, defeasible, non-inferential justification for belief in God which in some cases is sufficient for knowledge. This original and interesting book essentially consists in an explication, unpacking, and defense of this main idea. Evans attempts to use the concept of a theistic natural sign to explain how we can have non-inferential knowledge of God’s reality, why theistic arguments are so pervasive and forceful (for those who find them so), and, finally, why such arguments can so readily be resisted.

In the second chapter of the book Evans unpacks the concept of a theistic natural sign. Theistic natural signs are similar but not identical to Reidian natural signs, the latter being the means by which, according to Thomas Reid, we perceive the external world. Reidian natural signs can either be mental, such as the sensation of solidity one gets from touching a hard object, or physical, such as the perception of body posture. Here one perceives, say, that someone is sad by means of a perception of his or her bodily posture. Either way, and details aside, the key idea here is that Reidian natural signs make possible non-inferential knowledge (perception is a paradigm case here). Similarly, there are theistic natural signs that make possible non-inferential knowledge of God’s reality. Evans is careful to point out that the justification here can be sufficient for knowledge but is also prima facie and

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defeasible. The signs Evans has in mind are cosmic wonder (chapter three), beneficial order (chapter four), and the experience of moral accountability and the intrinsic worth of human beings (chapter five). These theistic natural signs point to the reality of God’s existence in the same way that Reidian natural signs point to the objects of perception. According to Evans, humans have an “in-built propensity” to believe in God when they encounter the aforementioned signs (37). Evans is careful to point out that theistic natural signs function mainly to make us aware of God, not to provide us with a rich storehouse of theological propositions about God; thus, theistic natural signs “underdetermine any beliefs about God we may form as a result” of using them (185) and may well lead to multifarious and even false beliefs about God (33-36).

In the first two chapters (and then at various points throughout the book) Evans argues that theistic natural signs satisfy two important epistemological principles regarding the knowledge of God (the principles themselves are explicated in chapter one), which he calls “Pascalian constraints” (17). First, there is the Wide Accessibility Principle (WAP), according to which, if God exists, we should expect the knowledge of him to be widely available. Evans’s second is the Easy Resistibility Principle (ERP), according to which the knowledge of God is to be expected to be resistible by rational people – i.e. God does not make his reality so evident that it would be rationally impossible to disbelieve in him. While defending ERP later in the book (chapter six) Evans concedes that the knowledge of God is so resistible that there may well be cases of inculpable unbelief – i.e. cases of unbelief in which the seeker is motivated to believe in God but is unable to do so through no fault of her own. The rationale for the ERP is that God would value freely given love and devotion from us and that undeniable evidence of God would force many of us to begrudgingly jump on the theistic bandwagon when we would otherwise prefer not to. Such begrudging allegiance is not really what God is after.

Theistic natural signs, then, provide us with widely accessible but easily resistible prima facie, non-inferential justification (sufficient for knowledge in some cases) for a belief in God’s reality by making believers aware of that reality. This, however, is not the only role they play in the knowledge of God. It is possible to reflection the signs themselves and use them to develop an argument for the reality to which they point, and this is exactly what Evans claims is going on with natural theology. More specifically, at the core of the cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments for God’s existence lies the natural signs of cosmic wonder, beneficial order, our experience of moral accountability, and our experience of the intrinsic worth of human beings, respectively. The signs serve as the ground or foundation of the arguments. As Evans puts it, “The arguments themselves are best understood as attempts to articulate those signs and make their evidential force more apparent” (24). Evans is careful to point out that the power of the signs is not limited to their value for making theistic arguments and that the signs may still provide evidence for God
even if they function poorly when used to formulate premises for a theistic argument. Additionally, for Evans, any power that theistic arguments do have is derived from the signs that lie at their foundation.

In chapters three through five Evans discusses the cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments for God’s existence and the signs that lie at their foundation and give them their power, a power not exhausted by their role in fashioning premises: cosmic wonder (cosmological argument), beneficial order (teleological argument), and moral accountability and intrinsic human worth (moral argument). In these chapters Evans does a nice job of taxonomizing the various types of the arguments in question and providing brief accounts of their strengths and weaknesses. He is very open about the resistibility of their premises and concedes that rational people can and do reject the arguments. On the other hand, he frequently provides or suggests theistic rebuttals to the objections (he is by no means, nor attempts to be, exhaustive), and his considered position seems to be that the arguments themselves rest on plausible assumptions that are widely accepted. The uncertainty to which they are prey to is to be expected given the ERP; moreover, no philosophical argument of substance succeeds with certainty, so these arguments are really no worse off than most other substantive philosophical arguments (170).

Partisans of the arguments, and their objectors, may well quibble with Evans’s taxonomies and his appraisals of the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments. Such quibbles, moreover, may be correct, but they would miss the point Evans is trying to make. Evans is not trying to defend or defeat the arguments themselves. Though he does seem favorably disposed to the arguments, Evans willingly concedes their shortcomings. In addition to being intellectually honest, he seems willing to do this for at least two reasons. The first is that, for him, the power of the signs which lie at the foundations of the arguments is not exhausted (his term) by their role in the arguments. People can and do move from the signs to an awareness and conception of God in non-inferential but justified fashion. Evans attempts to showcase the force of the signs by concluding chapters three through five with discussions of those who are skeptical of the arguments but who recognize the power of the signs. Second, given ERP, resistibility is to be expected.

Evans considers a variety of objections to his project; two are worth mentioning. One is that scientific explanations of religious belief undermine its validity. Evans turns this objection on its head, finding instead support for the wide accessibility of the knowledge of God in scientific accounts of religious belief which argue that belief in God/gods is hard-wired in human beings. In connection with this argument Evans does a good job deposing objections to religious belief that putatively follow from evolutionary explanations of religion. He notes that, if evolutionary explanations for a cognitive faculty automatically render it unreliable, then all of our cognitive faculties are doomed, not just the one(s) responsible for
It is possible to criticize Evans here on the grounds that he does nothing to show that any such natural process, including his own account, is veridical – showing logical consistency is not the same as providing positive evidence, after all. Aware of this, Evans attempts to shield himself from the criticism in two ways. First, he says that he is not assuming that God exists but is merely “asking what would follow from God’s existence” (13). Second, he argues that we have no option but to trust the outputs of our cognitive faculties unless we have a reason not to and that this policy should be extended to the beliefs we form in the basic, non-inferential way on the basis of theistic natural signs (174-184). Evans is willing to concede that, while the theistic natural signs do provide some support for belief in God, support enough for knowledge in some cases, folks who have defeater worries will need “additional considerations” (187). The implication seems to be that the prima facie justification provided by theistic natural signs can be so slight and partial and subject to potential defeat for some folks that they will need additional evidence as well as defeater-defeaters in order to be, at the end of the day, justified in their theistic belief. On the other hand, however: “People who find the theistic natural signs to be powerful and are aware of no defeaters for belief in God are reasonable to believe in God just on their basis” (186-187).

A complaint could here be lodged, however, on the grounds that Evans provides no empirical evidence for his contention that people do in fact usually form theistic beliefs in response to the theistic natural signs he discusses in this book. On the other hand, Evans does concede that the theistic natural signs of cosmic wonder, beneficial order, moral accountability, and intrinsic human worth are not the only available grounds for belief in God (156), thus preserving the possibility that WAP is correct even if his favored theistic natural signs are not the main organ for theistic belief.

The other objection worthy of mention is the problem of divine hiddenness, which occupies most of chapter six. Initially the problem takes the form of an objection to WAP: knowledge of God should be more widespread than it is. Evans responds to this by arguing that WAP cannot be strengthened too much or else ERP is compromised: “Whatever God might do to make the knowledge of God truly universal would make such knowledge impossible to resist” (158). The problem then morphs into J. L. Schellenberg’s complaint (lodged here in Evans’s terms): it seems that the knowledge of God is too resistible, that there are cases of inculpable unbelief which a loving God would, if he were real, not allow. It is fine that the
knowledge of God is not universal, but the least God could do is make himself evident enough such that the only ones who disbelieve are those who are motivated to do so. Evans’s initial response is skepticism that there really are cases of inculpable unbelief: perhaps we are self-deceived about our motivations. Evans quickly drops this line of reasoning, however, and concedes the possibility of inculpable unbelief. The reason inculpable unbelief is not a defeater for theism is that we are not in a position to say that God does not have good reasons for allowing it. Evans sees the problem of divine hiddenness as a particular application of the problem of evil, arguing that if we have reason to trust God in the face of the problem of evil in a general sense, then the same goes for the problem of divine hiddenness (164-166). This is essentially a skeptical theist defense offered in response to a particular evil and thus inherits the merits and/or demerits of skeptical theism.

The book, overall, is quite good and does provide its readers with a plausible account of how the knowledge of God might go, an account that explains the data of widespread belief, the pervasiveness and force of natural theology, and the persistency of unbelief and resistance to theistic arguments. An element of weakness deserving of mention here, however, is Evans’s argument in favor of ERP, to wit, that God wants us to freely and joyfully love and serve him and that such a response is undermined by more certain evidence of his existence (15-16). Here’s the problem: what God would want is freely offered friendship. The word “freely” here denotes an indeterministic choice motivated in the right way – i.e. a genuine choice, correctly made, for the right reasons. It is unimportant that the doxastic element here, belief in God, be secured in a voluntaristic fashion. There seems to be no value in deciding what to believe in the way that we decide what to do on a Friday night, and in any case we are not doxastic voluntarists and cannot just freely choose what to believe. The only way, then, that more certain evidence of God’s reality could compromise the goal of freely chosen friendship with God is if stronger evidence either (1) made us more likely to choose antagonism over friendship or (2) somehow lessened our freedom of choice, rendering us more automaton-like in our decision in favor of God. Both of these options lessen the likelihood of freely chosen friendship and would be grounds for God holding back on the quality of the evidence for God.

The rub, however, is that the second option seems to be a non-starter and the first, while at least worthy of consideration, finds no mention in the book. Thus, Evans really provides no grounds to dismiss the possibility that God could provide much stronger evidence of himself without compromising his goal of freely chosen love and service, or friendship. Maybe, however, there is some outweighing good that is obtained by God giving us just the amount of evidence he has; or perhaps there is some evil more worse than the present-day level of unfriendliness with God that is prevented by God giving us just the amount of evidence he has. We can only speculate here, and Evans does do some of that, suggesting
that perhaps some relationships with God are better off if they are produced through a long, difficult process (164). Evans also makes the plausible claim that, if we find that God is trustworthy in certain cases, then we may very well have grounds for trusting him in situations where we have little to no idea what he is up to, meaning we can trust God in the epistemic situation in which we in fact find ourselves in even when we lack an understanding as to why it isn’t better (165). It isn’t, then, that nothing whatsoever can be said at all, but simply that more needs to be said in support of ERP or some version of it. As it stands it needs another supporting beam, something more to buttress it against the strong winds in the air.