

**Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments**, C. Stephen Evans, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010 (ISBN: 978-0199217168), x + 207 pp., Hb \$85.00

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There are many reasons to recommend C. Stephen Evans' new book *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments*. It is accessible and open in its style, and deals skillfully with what I consider to be the most important subject we can study: our ability to know God. Indeed, one of the purposes of his book is to argue for the value of natural theology and for its place in philosophical, theological, and apologetic studies. The book can be read with profit by a wide audience, from undergraduate and graduate students to the interested general public. The chapters on the specific forms of theistic arguments serve as helpful introductions and surveys of these arguments and I plan on having my students read them. Evans also wrestles through important epistemological problems, advocating an approach traceable to Thomas Reid, and seeks to reconcile otherwise divergent Reformed and Evidentialist schools of apologetics. I found this an engaging and stimulating work that will benefit both my teaching and my research. However, I do want to argue that we must do more than simply find room for natural theology, or argue that it is possible, and instead demonstrate why it is necessary for Christianity.

The book begins by discussing the reality that theistic arguments are at an impasse. That is, many people find the traditional theistic proofs for God's existence compelling, and many people find the same proofs devoid of strength. Evans' argument is that this very situation can serve as a kind of proof for the value of these arguments. He explains why by giving us two principles: the 'wide accessibility principle' and the 'easy resistibility principle'. The first says that if God (as understood by the theistic religions) exists, then it is likely that there is a natural knowledge of God accessible by most persons. The second says that it is additionally the case that while such knowledge is widely available it is also easy to resist. That is, any proofs for God's existence will also be ambiguous enough to allow for more than one interpretation and not arrive at a certain conclusion.

The book contains six chapters. The first introduces the problem of natural theology, a two-step apologetic, the two principles, and the claim that theistic proofs are not conclusive. The second chapter considers Thomas Reid's philosophy of signs and how this can be applied to the theistic arguments. Chapters 3–5 study the cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments, consider important objections to these,

and explain how they serve as signs of God's existence. The sixth concludes the study with a discussion of the hiddenness of God, and includes fascinating discussions of Kant, Schellenberg and the hiddenness of God, Pascalian constraints, basic beliefs and justification, internalism and externalism, special revelation and Paul Moser. I will be considering many of these in more detail in what follows.

The argument of the book is that natural theology, though inconclusive, can be a pointer to a thicker theism found in special revelation, which gives a more robust view of God, is morally transformative, and offers us the possibility of a relationship with God. Although God's existence makes it likely that there is a widely accessible natural theology, a natural theology that is clear to those who are willing to believe, it must also be ambiguous enough to not be coercive and so leave human freedom intact.

Because the theme of the book rests on the possibility of natural theology as a sign but not as a necessity it is worth taking time to ask why knowing God is important. Is the study of natural theology just for a few scholars or does it have relevance for everyone? Does an ambiguous world protect human freedom, or could the world clearly reveal God while leaving humans the freedom to reject what is clear? In order to make sense of these questions we will need to define the important terms 'know' and 'God'. We can distinguish 'knowledge' from 'opinion', where the latter includes incorrect opinion and correct opinion. I take this distinction to lie in the ability to give proof that what is known is indeed the case and not simply opinion (which could be wrong). What we can note for now is that many kinds of proof do not actually distinguish a belief from opinion and make assumptions that themselves must be proven: appeals to common sense assume that appearance is reality and different people and groups make competing claims about how things appear; appeals to intuition assume that the natural sign is always accompanied by the reality, or that the sign is the reality; appeals to experience (religious or sense experience) assume that the experience has been interpreted correctly. Knowledge requires stronger proof than appeals to common sense, intuition, or experience.

By 'God' I mean God the Creator, or more specifically the theistic definition where God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchanging in being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. Thus we can distinguish belief in God the Creator from belief in a first cause, or an unmoved mover, or a designer, or a law giver. Although God may be these things, these can also be used by alternative definitions of 'God' in non-theistic belief systems. And so, when we ask if we can know God, we are asking if we can distinguish a belief in God the Creator from mere opinion about God the Creator. Is natural theology necessary to know God, and to make sense of special revelation?

I believe Professor Evans is correct in the claim that if God exists then natural knowledge of God is possible. However, I am not sure signs will be sufficient to distinguish the belief that there is a God as more than an opinion. For instance, if God does not exist could not we also expect that there would be enough ambiguity in the world to allow some people to see signs of God's existence? In other words, these signs could be there either way and so do not help in telling us for what reason they are present. Furthermore, to link these signs to the willingness of a person to believe, because they are clear to those who are already willing to believe, appears to be circular: the signs are clear because people who are willing to believe accept them, and a person is willing to believe because they do not 'put up a fight' but rather accept the signs. So, they would be present whether God exists or not, and they are helpful only for those who are already predisposed to believe in God.

If the world is ambiguous or inconclusive about what it reveals concerning God, can humans be held responsible to know God? If God cannot be known, or alternatives to theism are rationally acceptable, then humans have an excuse for unbelief and are not responsible. On the other hand, if there is a sense in which humans are responsible for knowing God, even to the extent of it being said that the failure to know God is inexcusable, then it seems we will need to add a principle to those given by Professor Evans. I called this the 'principle of clarity' in my book *The Clarity of God's Existence: The Ethics of Belief After the Enlightenment*. This principle states that if it is inexcusable to fail to know God, then it must be clear that God exists, which means that there is no excuse for believing the contrary. I believe this principle, added to those offered by Professor Evans (widely accessible and easily resisted), gives us a very strong picture of the human condition and the need for redemption.

In order to develop this picture further it will help to discuss the role of skepticism in current thinking about natural theology and how it finds expression in a number of themes discussed in this book. I mean by 'skepticism' the claim that knowledge (all, or some particular knowledge) is not possible. There are many reasons why a person becomes a skeptic about knowledge, but one of the most common is the appeal to widespread failure to know. This is a kind of *ad populum*. It assumes that people are living the examined life, rather than that people are leading the unexamined life and not seeking or understanding. It is true that there has been an abysmal history of theistic proofs. It is true that the theistic proofs as given historically have not resulted in a conclusive outcome. However, rather than allowing this to be used as support that such proof is not possible, I am going to suggest an alternative interpretation. Namely, perhaps the lack of a conclusive outcome about the God of theism is due to not aiming at this outcome. The criticism that

proofs only give us the God of the philosophers, and the thinness of this 'God' as merely a first cause, or designer, or law-giver, begs the question. Why philosophers have not tried to prove a more 'theistic' God's existence points to self-imposed limitations on these philosophers. Indeed, I am going to argue that it points to a failure to understand why knowing God is important, and an exchange of the knowledge of God for something else, something that distorts who God is.

Another manner in which the skeptical position might be adopted, and which relates to the Easy to Resist principle, is that if the knowledge of God is available from general revelation then humans would be coerced into knowing God. I understand conclusive arguments differently. I do not think of them as coercive, but rather as compelling. A person may be presented with a sound argument and this argument will indeed compel the person, but in one of two directions: the person could accept the conclusion of a sound argument and in so doing affirm his/her commitment to reason; or a person could reject the conclusion of a sound argument and in so doing expose his/her failure to use reason. So a person is free to accept or reject the conclusion of a sound argument, and a person is free to use reason to understand or to reject reason and not understand. Ambiguity (hiddenness) does not protect freedom, and indeed it undermines responsibility (one cannot be held responsible to keep a law that is ambiguous, nor can one be said to know if what is said to be known is ambiguous).

Skepticism is also present in the externalist description of knowledge, and the assertion that some beliefs are basic and these are warranted rather than justified internally. An externalist account of knowledge is one that describes the kind of behavior that is called 'knowledge'. An internalist account of knowledge is one that answers the question 'how do I know?' from a first person perspective. Externalism can sometimes be found to assert that internalism is not a successful account of knowledge. In order to discuss the problems that internalism faces, Professor Evans provides us with Michael Bergmann's dilemma for internalism: In a simplified form, the dilemma states that the internalist either faces an infinite regress of justification or must settle for weak justification.

What I have described above about knowledge is an internalist account, and it does reserve the term 'knowledge' for instances where there cannot be a mistake and so requires strong justification (showing the opposite is impossible is one example). But what about the Bergmann dilemma? I am going to argue that in one form externalism is not a problem for internalism, but in another and perhaps the most popular form it is a kind of skepticism about the human ability to know. This form of externalism says that humans cannot have strong justification where they show the alternative is impossible and so externalist accounts of knowledge are our best bet. However,

any argument to support his claim will rely on an internalist mode of knowing. That is, externalism of this kind gives internalist arguments to support the claim that internalist knowledge is not possible. Internalism is unavoidable.

The claim that internalism must settle for weak justification often relies on an ambiguity about kinds of knowledge claims. Indeed, what I have spoken of above as justification will be considered 'strong justification', and many elicit the response 'that makes knowledge too difficult'. I believe this can be resolved by noting that there is a difference between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how', and 'knowing by acquaintance'. A person may be able to ride a bike, and so be said to know how to ride a bike, without being able to justify this. Similarly, a person might know a taste by acquaintance without being able to justify this. However, these seem to assume that something exists, and so a person can still be asked questions about their knowledge 'that'. A religious person might say 'I know God exists because I'm acquainted with God through a relationship', but can reasonably be asked 'how do you know that it is God you have a relationship with?' It also seems to be true that when it comes to 'knowledge that', most people are living the unexamined life and cannot give a justification for their beliefs, nor do they care to do so; this is the dangerous position of the philosopher as illustrated in Plato's *Apology*.

I believe Bergmann is correct in his dilemma, but left out one horn (a trilemma). Either there is an infinite regress of strong justification, or we settle for weak justification, or there is a level at which justification stops because it is the level that makes justification possible. What I mean is that we must distinguish between 'justification', which Bergmann says would go on to infinity, and 'that which makes justification possible', which I will call the laws of thought, or reason. Reason provides justification by applying the law of non-contradiction, but it does not need to be justified because any form of justification assumes reason. Reason cannot be questioned because it makes questioning possible. Any such question would be self-referentially absurd. And so strong internalist justification can be given without an infinite regress by appealing to reason as that which makes thought and justification possible.

And this also gives us a picture of how we might unite externalism and internalism. I mentioned that there is a form of externalism that is not in competition with internalism. Perhaps I can rephrase this to say that at the basic level these collapse: at the basic level, an externalist description of how people know would be a description of the use of the laws of thought, and an internalist justification would be an appeal to the laws of thought.

For Professor Evans, the discussion about this arises because of the influence of Reformed Epistemology. Reformed Epistemology speaks

about basic beliefs, which are immediate beliefs (not inferential) related to religious experience such as the sense of being forgiven. This relies on an externalist description such as: belief in God is due to proper epistemic functioning according to a design plan aimed at truth. Needless to say, this definition begs the question by using the term 'design' in the definition. What is at stake is whether there is any design at all. What must be proven is that God has indeed created humans according to this externalist description, otherwise it is mere assertion.

I believe we can combine the principles of clarity, wide accessibility, and easily resistible, to argue that although God's eternal power and divine nature are clearly revealed from what has been made (general revelation), humans have rejected this and instead exchanged the glory of God for distortions of God. This fundamental misunderstanding of the world has in turn led to misunderstandings of the world at all levels of human life. And therefore, even when humans claim to be the wisest, this wisdom is based on a failure to know what is clear at the most basic level. It is because of this that humans need redemption and a renewing of their minds.

This picture rests on the claim that it is indeed clear that God exists. I believe we can make sense of the clarity of God's existence and the failure of theistic proofs historically by noting that what humans have done is exchanged the eternal power of God for something else. That is, humans have attributed eternality to something besides God, something that is actually a creation of God. And so we can consider if there is any excuse for attributing eternal existence (without beginning, not to be confused with everlasting existence) to something besides God the Creator. This may seem daunting if we think of human belief systems in their particularity rather than as expressions of a limited number of kinds. However, I believe that if we understand the structure of worldviews we will see that there are only a limited number of basic beliefs that have been relied upon to construct the many worldviews found in history.

To avoid ambiguity that undermines responsibility, natural theology, as the study of general revelation, must tell us that there is only one basic belief that is rationally coherent. However, for those who do accept natural theology as a viable subject, the going attitude is that it provides a very bare knowledge of God, and at best serves to point to special revelation. These are two distinct but related claims. Coupled with the bare view of natural theology is the belief that it serves little to no transformative purpose in people's lives and so is not vital.

In contrast to this view of natural theology, I believe that responsibility requires a much different view, to argue that the eternal power and divine nature of God are known from what has been made, and that these give a full and clear knowledge of God and God's will for human life. Furthermore, that it is only on this basis that we can make



sense of unbelief as sin, the need for redemption from unbelief and its lifestyle, and what constitutes special revelation as a redemptive revelation.

Earlier I mentioned that the theistic arguments were not aimed at establishing theism, but rather some lesser goal that would be consistent with forms of non-theism as well. I suggested that this might be due to how Christians have perceived the goal of life, and that this goal minimizes knowledge (and so why do the work of giving an argument to show the impossibility of the contrary) and is otherworldly (thus minimizing what can be known or needs to be known in this world). This otherworldly goal has been called the beatific vision, or heaven, where one perceives God directly. This distorts God into the kind of being that can be perceived directly, and overlooks God's works of creation and providence as a revelation of who God is.

By way of contrast, what I am suggesting is that eternal life is knowing God. This places a dear value on knowledge and will not allow us to settle for propped up opinions, but requires we have gotten it right and that the alternative is not possible. It places such a value on knowledge because God cannot be known directly, but is known mediately through understanding the works of God in creation and providence. To argue that God is best known through special revelation, which is redemption revelation, assumes what must be proven: that God exists and that humans need redemption. Rather, redemptive revelation is what restores humans to being able to know God as they should have. In this sense it assumes general revelation: there must be a clear general revelation to make sense of sin and inexcusability, general revelation shows that there is a God and so special revelation is possible, and special revelation teaches how persons can be restored to knowing what is clear from general revelation.

I believe that the clarity of general revelation is affirmed in scripture. However, I would start by demonstrating that it connects up with the human need to know, and particularly to know what is ultimate and therefore eternal. It should not be surprising that human history is mostly filled with attempts to deny that there is such knowledge, or that knowledge of the eternal is not important or not possible. Indeed, it is what one should expect if it is true that all humans have turned aside to their own way. And yet it is equally unsurprising that humans have made knowledge claims about what is eternal because of the human need to know and find meaning.

I believe these considerations give us plenty to engage with in Professor Evans' book. I have suggested that his principles are indeed important, but also that they need to be supplemented with what I have called the principle of clarity. I have agreed with him that the theistic proofs to date have not shown that theism is true, but I have gone in a different direction by arguing that if unbelief is inexcusable then we

must be able to show that there are no grounds for rejecting theism. Therefore, I have disagreed that the world must be ambiguous to protect freedom, or that special revelation can give us a more full knowledge of God while general revelation is bare.

I believe that Professor Evans and I share the commitment that natural theology is relevant and important. However, I go a step further and argue that it is necessary. Natural theology as the study of general revelation is necessary to make sense of sin, redemption, and special revelation. It cannot replace special revelation, nor can the content of special revelation be deduced from general revelation. However, we should be equally careful to guard what has been clearly revealed about the eternal power and divine nature of God from the things that are made. And this all the more so if we believe that eternal life consists in knowing God.

### *Response to Owen Anderson*

*By C. Stephen Evans*

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I appreciate the thoughtful review of Owen Anderson, especially his careful and accurate description of the contents of *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God*. And of course I very much appreciate his praise of the book's style and argumentative force, and the fact that he agrees with much of what I say. However, his review, of course, also contains some significant objections. These objections are extremely important, and I will do my best to explain here why my book takes the path it does rather than the one Professor Anderson wishes it had taken.

In my book, as Professor Anderson explains, I try to show that a natural knowledge of God is possible. People can come to know about God on the basis of 'natural signs', such as the mysteriousness of the fact that a contingent universe exists, or the orderly purposiveness we seem to experience in nature, our sense of moral obligation, or our sense that humans have intrinsic worth and dignity. I try to show how these signs point to God. They can give rise to a knowledge of God that is 'properly basic', as Reformed epistemologists affirm, but they can also provide the basis for inferential arguments for God's existence, as classical evidential apologists argue. I try to show that these arguments have genuine force, as do the signs that lie at their core.

Professor Anderson approves of all this, but he thinks my arguments do not go far enough in defending a rational knowledge of God. I confess that this line of attack was not one I was anticipating in writing the book. I am confident that the majority of philosophers would judge the book as having gone too far; they would criticize me for overestimating the power of these arguments and the signs that I see as lying at



their base. Still, I think I can explain why I think that the porridge in this case is neither too cold, nor too hot, but 'just right'.

Although I argue that these natural signs have genuine epistemic force, and that even religious non-believers can recognize this force, I claim that they are not 'proofs' in the sense that no reasonable person who understands the signs (or the premises in the arguments if we have a case of inferential arguments) could fail to believe in God. I do not find this result disturbing or surprising for several reasons. First of all, I am a fallibilist about human knowledge generally. That is, many of the things I believe that I know are things that I recognize I could be wrong about. Of course I do not think I am wrong; that is why I think I know those things. But I recognize the possibility that I could be wrong. I have been wrong before. Human beings are finite, fallible beings, and our knowledge shares in these qualities. So it does not seem necessary for me to show that my knowledge of God is such that it could not be mistaken in order for it to be genuine knowledge.

Second, as Anderson notes, I accept the 'Easy Resistibility Principle'. That is, I believe that there are good reasons why God might allow a degree of ambiguity in our religious experience and experience of the world generally. Because God is all-powerful and all-knowing, if humans were compelled to be aware of his reality, even self-interested and unloving humans would recognize the futility of opposition to God. If God wants followers who serve him freely, out of a motivation of love, he might have reasons to allow some uncertainty about his reality. This allows those who really love God (or the Good, if Christian Platonists are right) to commit themselves to what they love, without any guarantee that they are on the 'winning side', so to speak. Such a risky commitment may be part of what such religions as Christianity have in mind when they extol the value of faith.

Anderson thinks this is not enough. He wants to add to my two principles what he calls the 'principle of clarity'. According to this view, the natural knowledge of God must be so clear and powerful that those who fail to believe are blameworthy, 'without excuse'. On Anderson's view, my defense of natural theology really leaves us in the grips of skepticism, for genuine knowledge requires not just true opinion, but true opinion backed by 'proof'.

I disagree. Part of my disagreement stems from the fact that I think that the degree of ambiguity and uncertainty in our experience is a reality. I know people who are apparently reasonable who do not find the arguments for God's existence compelling. I myself at some times and in some moods find myself wondering if God is real.

However, the deeper reason for my disagreement lies in differing epistemological stances. I think that requiring 'proof' for genuine knowledge is an unreasonable requirement. I think this partly because I believe I know many things that I cannot prove. (For example, I know

what I had for breakfast this morning, and also that I am sitting in front of a computer at the moment.) I also believe that 'proof' is an unreasonable requirement for knowledge because of the history of modern philosophy, which I have taught virtually every year for almost forty years. The 'quest for certainty' that such a requirement expresses is exactly the impetus for classical foundationalist epistemology, as found in Descartes and Locke. And I agree with Thomas Reid that the conclusions of Berkeley and Hume follow logically from the premises of classical foundationalist epistemology. It is precisely classical foundationalist epistemology that generates skepticism. Fallibilist epistemologies do not leave us in skepticism, but deliver us from that morass.

The argument that we must trust reason that Anderson gives actually supports a Reidian perspective. Reid would agree that we must trust reason without any non-circular proof or justification. However, Reid would ask why we should do this for reason and not for other basic human faculties, such as perception and memory. After all, as he rhetorically notes, 'they all came out of the same shop'. The fact that our other human faculties are fallible is not a reason for failing to trust them, just as the fact that we sometimes make mistakes when we reason is not a reason for us to reject reason.

Let me note in conclusion that, although Anderson discusses the divide between externalism and internalism in epistemology at some length, I do not think that distinction is important in this context. Although my personal sympathies are decidedly externalist, in my book I try to show that my conclusions about natural theology can be equally supported from an internalist or externalist perspective. What I rely on is a 'principle of epistemological parity', although I do not use this term in the book. If we have an epistemology that is adequate to explain the non-religious knowledge we in fact have, regardless of whether that epistemology be internalist or externalist, that epistemology will also be adequate to show how a natural knowledge of God is possible. For an internalist epistemology to satisfy this standard it must accept something like a 'principle of credulity', which says that the fact that things seem to be a certain way is *prima facie* evidence that they are that way. For an externalist epistemology to satisfy this standard we must commit to trust in our basic human faculties. (One part of my book Anderson does not discuss is the new research in evolutionary psychology that supports the claim that we are 'hard-wired' to believe in God; I think this research provides modest support for my natural signs view.) Both internalists and externalists can tell a plausible story about how natural signs give rise to knowledge of God.