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THE EXISTENCE OF GOD AND THE EXISTENCE OF HOMER: RETHINKING THEISM AND REVELATORY CLAIMS

Sandra Menssen and Thomas D. Sullivan

Can a convincing case be made for the claim that a good God has revealed something to us? We are not asking whether religious belief is rational, or might be properly basic. We are rather asking the question the unconvinced demand be confronted. The standard way of arguing the affirmative creates a huge, unnecessary problem by tacitly presupposing that a sound case for a revelatory claim requires first working up a highly plausible argument for the existence of a good God. Once it is seen that this presupposition is false, the way is open to following a nonstandard philosophical path. For if facts about the universe yield enough evidence to show that the existence of a creator of some ilk is not highly implausible, it is possible that the content of a putative revelation might serve to close the evidential gap. And, we contend, our knowledge of the universe does yield the required modicum of evidence. It turns out, then, that *a negative conclusion about the existence of God is unwarranted unless the content of revelatory claims has been considered.*

1. The standard way of building a case for theism and revelatory claims: its rationale and its troubles.

Has a good God given us a revelation?¹ Many philosophically-inclined nonbelievers wonder. They are not particularly interested in the rationality of the claim that God has revealed. A belief can be rational, but false. They want to know whether the claim is *true*. Nor are they engaged by the question of whether belief in God or some particular revelatory claim might be properly basic. They judge that they have no belief at all in God, and certainly not properly basic belief. Hopeful, often, of becoming believers, but wary of religious enthusiasms and determined to follow reason, such agnostics seek a *philosophical case* that there is a God who has communicated to us.

Can they find a convincing case? The long tradition of natural theology provides an intricate tangle of arguments, elaborated over the years. The paths typically cut for an agnostic inquirer facing this thicket of arguments share an important feature. These paths tacitly presuppose:

(P) One cannot obtain a convincing philosophical case for a revelatory claim without first obtaining a highly plausible case for a good God.



On the view marked by presupposition (P), which we will call the *standard*² view, an inquirer begins by trying to establish a highly plausible case for the existence of a good God, a case sufficiently plausible that when the best argument available for the truth of some putative revelation is tacked on, the outcome is a case for the revelatory claim that is at least equiprobable, and ideally more probable than not.

Presupposition (P) carries some intuitive appeal. And logical considerations about complex questions may well appear to support (P). In general, it may seem, if one is trying to answer a complex question, one must first answer any embedded simpler questions. And it is, indeed, easy to find cases where it is eminently sensible to answer at least some of the sub-questions before tackling the complex question. It is, for instance, preposterous for a physician to try to decide whether a certain cancer therapy will benefit a patient without first getting a fairly good fix on whether the patient has cancer.

Logical though it may seem, the standard approach to building a case for a revelatory claim routinely stymies inquirers. It is exceedingly difficult for many agnostics (and many theists as well) to believe that a good God could have created this world, with all its evils, *unless* there is an afterlife in which wrongs are righted. And in the minds of many, agnostics and theists alike, arguments available through philosophy, through unaided natural reason, are insufficient to establish the existence of an afterlife of the right sort. Theists who accept a revelatory claim that includes a good God's promise of eternal salvation have resources to handle the problem of evil. But it looks like an agnostic cannot build a case that a revelatory claim is plausible without first assenting to the claim that there is a good God; and it looks to many agnostics like the existence of evil makes this impossible.³ And even if an agnostic can assign a fairly high probability to the claim that there is a good God, that is a long way from endorsing a particular revelatory claim. (Alvin Plantinga argues that even if an *extremely* generous estimate concerning the probability of theism is made, it will be virtually impossible to move on in the standard way and push the probability of Christianity up above .5.⁴)

It is thus easy to despair of the standard approach. Dissatisfaction with it may drive theistic philosophers to seek an alternative to natural theology, an alternative to building a reasoned case for theism and revelatory claims. Philosophical believers certainly do offer alternatives. Plantinga, for instance, defends a "testimonial" model of belief, which portrays Christian belief as warranted (if true); Paul Moser articulates a "filial" approach to knowledge of God, which he contrasts with an approach reliant on natural theology.⁵ However, such alternatives have extremely limited appeal to philosophically-inclined nonbelievers interested in exploring religion, but resolved to accept Christianity, or any revealed religion, *only* if there is a good case to be had for it.

Is there an alternative to the standard approach that can engage inquiring agnostics? Recall that the standard way of building a case presupposes (P), and that (P) enjoys an initial plausibility, backed by reflection on the problem of handling complex questions. It turns out, however, that the philosophical rationale supporting (P) is defective. Examples show it is a

mistake to think that if the truth of a complex proposition is at issue, and that proposition embeds sub-propositions, then each embedded sub-proposition must first be established.

Here is a particularly pertinent example: it is sometimes clearly reasonable to ask whether an intelligent but nonhuman being has sent a message, rather than *first* asking whether there are any intelligent beings who are not human, and *then* asking whether such a being has sent a message. The SETI research program (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) involves monitoring millions of radio signals from outer space. Many natural objects emit these signals, but SETI researchers look for signals that almost certainly would have to be sent by intelligent agents. Imagine that researchers discover a 1126 bit sequence corresponding to the prime numbers from 2 to 101. The statement "Some highly intelligent life form in outer space has sent this signal" embeds "There is (or was) some highly intelligent life in outer space," but it is eminently reasonable to try to confirm the embedding statement in order to confirm the embedded statement.

Perhaps it will be objected that the investigative procedures just described *cannot* be proper, not in the way we described them, because the procedures commit "the fallacy of the complex question." In fact, however, there is no relevant fallacy here to worry about. Yes, Aristotle talked about the fallacy of the complex question. And one finds it in most logic texts that deal with informal fallacies. But Aristotle's account is less than luminously clear.⁶ The text-book discussions of the so-called fallacy are typically defective.⁷ And a bit of reflection shows that for *any* complex question there is always at least one sub-question that cannot be answered before the complex question is answered, because there is no such thing as presuppositionless inquiry. Questions are always about propositions, and every proposition presupposes (at the very least) a domain of discourse. "Do unicorns exist?" will be answered in one way if the domain of discourse includes mental or fictional objects, in another way if these things are excluded from discussion.

Since the philosophical rationale supporting (P) does not survive scrutiny, an agnostic inquirer might well wonder whether a nonbeliever could find a philosophical case for accepting *at once* both the claim that God exists and the claim that God has revealed. In subsequent sections we will argue that an outsider could, indeed, discover such a case. In fact, we will argue for the stronger thesis that *a negative conclusion about the existence of God is unwarranted unless the content of revelatory claims has been considered.*

Before getting into details of our argument, an analogy may be useful. (Readers with a taste for mathematics might find the analogy helpful; others may prefer to skip to Section II.)

Over 2,000 years ago the Greeks worked with early forms of integral calculus. Archimedes developed a method for approximately measuring the area of a given region by inscribing within it regions whose areas can be easily computed, and summing the areas of these regions. The more regions that are inscribed, the closer one gets to exhausting the original region, and the more accurate the total area measurement. Newton and Leibniz, taking a cue from this "method of exhaustion," developed general, systematic treatments of both integral and differential calculus.

Notoriously, though their systems were powerful in application, they had defective foundations. Both men (most regularly Leibniz) spoke of infinitely small quantities, “infinitesimals” or “differentials.” The notion had intuitive appeal, but as Berkeley and others showed, the formal accounts of infinitesimals were internally inconsistent. It was not until the 19th century that mathematicians such as Cauchy and Weierstrass developed the “epsilon-delta” concept of moving toward a limit in a way sufficiently clear and rigorous to ground calculus. Reference to infinitesimals became thoroughly disreputable. There was a cost, however, to the epsilon-delta approach to calculus: though precise, its proofs and manipulations are awkward, and it is something of a disaster pedagogically.

In the 1960s the mathematician Abraham Robinson proposed an approach to calculus that he called “nonstandard analysis.” Returning to the intuitively appealing notion of an infinitesimal, an idea that appears in ordinary language when, for instance, we refer to “instants” of time, Robinson showed it is possible to set up a rigorous, consistent framework of analysis which includes infinitesimals. Drawing on work in mathematical logic, Robinson showed how to extend the real number system to include “hyperreals” (in something like the way rational numbers were extended to include “reals” in order to allow 2 to have a square root). The hyperreals include infinitesimals.

Nonstandard analysis is intuitively appealing to many, and further, much easier to learn and teach once modern mathematical logic is mastered. The delta-epsilon approach perfected by Weierstrass is certainly not wrong; it gives the right results—but for many students nonstandard analysis will be the pedagogically superior approach. The consensus among mathematicians today is that Robinson has rehabilitated the concept of an infinitesimal.

We will soon propose a nonstandard approach to building a philosophical case for revelatory claims, an approach that has certain advantages, just as in mathematics it is possible to develop a nonstandard approach to analysis that has its advantages. The awkward standard approach in analysis abandons infinitesimals (hyperreals) and pays a big price in the complications of its proofs. The nonstandard approach in analysis, which is in fact far more natural and easier to grasp, gains its advantages by allowing the use of hyperreals. Nonstandard analysis is in no way less rigorous. So too, the standard paths through natural theology, which ignore some elements inquirers are naturally inclined to bring into the discussion early on, unnecessarily complicate matters. There is no good reason for inquiring agnostics not to proceed in a way that many find natural, taking into account early the content of revelatory claims. By proceeding in this nonstandard but natural way, progress can be made at least equally well.

*II. Investigating the existence of Homer:
first premise of an argument for an alternative approach.*

We here defend a claim that will serve as the first premise in our argument that a negative conclusion about the existence of God is unwarranted unless the content of revelatory claims has been considered. The claim at issue is this:

(1) If the existence of some being *x* is problematic, but not exceedingly improbable, then the question of whether *x* exists has not adequately been considered unless communications widely alleged to have come from *x* have been considered.

The example introduced above concerning the SETI research program provides some implicit support for this contention. But because of the claim's importance, we wish to offer more explicit support by developing a parallel between the investigation of the existence of God and investigation of the existence of Homer.⁸

Despite the fact that even the ancient Athenians knew almost nothing about the life of Homer, they seem not to have doubted that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were both composed by a single individual. In the 6th century BC stories began to arise about the heritage and personality of the man believed to have authored the epics, but contemporary scholars find little in those traditions that is plausible except for the claim that Homer was an Ionian associated with Smurne and Khios.⁹ Much later, Cicero and Josephus both suggested that the *Iliad* had been composed without the aid of writing, but neither seems to have doubted that the composition was the work of a single individual.¹⁰

The first widespread debate about whether there actually was a single person responsible at least for the *Iliad* surfaced in the 18th century. In 1715 a work by the Abbe d'Aubignac was published that argued that Homer never lived,¹¹ and by the end of the century the powerful and influential work of the German scholar F.A. Wolf had persuaded a large number of scholars that there never was a Homer, a single person who composed the *Iliad*. In developing his case Wolf relied on a newly discovered tenth-century "Homer" manuscript with commentary going back to the Alexandrians, and on the sophisticated tools of Biblical scholarship being developed by German theologians.

Wolf appears to argue in his grand (but unfinished) *Prolegomena to Homer*¹² that there could not have been a single individual who composed the *Iliad*, because if the *Iliad* had been composed by one individual that person would have needed to rely on writing, and writing was not known in the time and place of composition of the *Iliad*. Now if one is convinced that without writing it is impossible for a poem the length of the *Iliad* to be retained in the human mind, then it is not going to matter much what the poem itself contains, what the internal or intrinsic evidence for a single author is. Bitter debate between the "analysts" (who took up the Wolfian argument) and the "unitarians," who disputed it on grounds of internal textual evidence, raged on up through the first part of the 20th century.

But in the 1930's the field work of Milman Parry showed that there is no doubt that epics the length of the *Iliad* can be composed orally when writing is absent from a culture. Parry transcribed an epic poem of the proper length from a bard in southern Serbia unable to read or write. Subsequently, other field workers documented similar feats of memory (e.g. by Uzbek and Kara-kirgiz bards).¹³ As the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* tells us:

The early arguments [against the existence of Homer] ... based on the belief that no man could have composed poems of such a length before writing was known, have now been dispelled by our knowledge of what memory can do when writing is not familiar.¹⁴

Given that it is not impossible, perhaps even not wildly implausible for a single poet to have had primary responsibility for the *Iliad*, scholars can ask: was there in fact one author? In answering this question, of course, the content of the poem is carefully considered. The cohesiveness of each poem as a whole is examined. The consistency and strength of the characters in the poem, and the development, power, and resolution of the main plot and of sub-themes within it is examined. The consistency and richness of the language is analyzed, and the regular appearance of certain features of vocabulary (including particular abstract nouns, Aeolic forms, and patronymics) studied. Types and number of similes and types of transitions used between major scenes are evaluated. The current consensus of opinion among the classicists seems to be that it is more likely than not that Homer did actually exist:

Most scholars now accept that the Homeric epics are the result of a developing oral epic tradition on the one hand, the unifying and creative work of an exceptional monumental composer on the other.¹⁵

How does all this bear on investigating theism and revelatory claims? It yields a central principle. The classicist begins reflection on the question of authorship of the *Iliad* conscious of a serious problem for anyone who says there was a single or principal author: absent writing, it is not clear the human mind is capable of the task of composition. Learning the feats of memory illiterate peoples accomplish clarifies things. It may not *fully* establish that a principal author could have composed the great poem: perhaps, for instance, the poem contains what seem to be eye-witness accounts of landmarks no single individual could have visited at the time (dealing with this problem would require arguing that the accounts are not eye-witness accounts, or that they were initially, but could have been woven into the *Iliad* by a principal author, or something of the sort). But fully establishing that a principal author could have composed the great poem is not necessary in order for a classicist to be motivated to undertake further inquiry about Homer, motivated to study the contents of the *Iliad* with the question of authorship in mind. Now it may seem that the most we can get out of reflection on the case of Homer is merely an analogy that allows us to gesture towards an approach for the investigation of the existence of God and the truth of revelatory claims. But it would be a mistake to see the case of Homer in this way, because we can get a generalization out of this case, and (eventually) deduce from the generalization. The general principle the Homer example establishes is this: *If the existence of some being x is problematic, but not exceedingly improbable, then the question of whether x exists has not adequately been considered unless communications widely alleged to have come from x have been considered.*

*III. Reflecting on the likelihood of an originator:
second premise of an argument for an alternative approach.*

This brings us to the second premise:

- (2) While the existence of an originator is problematic, it is not exceedingly improbable.

We understand an *originator* to be a cause of the universe—more specifically, a certain sort of necessary condition of the existence of the universe. As we use the term, “originator” does not even imply intellect. Nevertheless, to show that the existence of an originator is not highly implausible, not exceedingly unlikely or improbable, may *in one sense* be to show that God’s existence is not highly implausible. For if in fact God—the traditional God, the God not only of the philosophers but of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—does exist, a proof of an originator may be a proof of God in the sense that a proof of the existence of an electron is the proof of the existence of something with a charge of 1.6021¹⁹ C. One might establish that the existence of an originator is not highly unlikely without claiming that the hypothesis that there is an originator is explanatory in some rich sense. One might establish that an originator is not highly unlikely without saying a word about *how* the originator originates, without giving any details about how the universe is caused. And one might establish that an originator is not highly unlikely without saying a word about other attributes the originator may have.

It can, in fact, be shown—with surprisingly little effort—that the existence of an originator is not highly unlikely. All we need do is show that the conjunction of three quite appealing propositions is not highly improbable. The three, which we will list in a moment, are familiar small fragments of certain versions of the Kalam argument. But the use we make of them is unusual. Kalam arguments aim to establish that there is a creator. In keeping with our over-all strategy, we aim only to establish that the existence of a creator or originator is not highly unlikely. Therefore, we need not insist that each of the three propositions is true, or even highly probable; we need only show that the conjunction is not highly improbable. Here are the propositions:

- (A) The physical universe came to be (that is, had a beginning).¹⁶
- (B) Whatever comes to be has a cause (a certain sort of necessary condition).
- (C) Nothing causes itself to come to be.

If on some sensible reading of each proposition the conjunction of the three is not highly implausible, then it is not highly implausible that the universe has a cause distinct from itself, an originator. For all the argument tells us, there may be more than one cause of the universe, more than one originator: to say that there is *a* being causally responsible for the existence of the

universe is not to say there is only one such being.¹⁷ But if the argument is correct, it cannot be claimed that it is known or all but known that there is no creator.

Why think that the world came to be? Even many nontheists these days have been persuaded that the claim is true, given the theory that the world began from an initial singularity. The preponderance of opinion among contemporary cosmologists seems to be that the world did not always exist, that there was an initial singularity out of which the world developed. On this basis alone it looks like we can assign the claim that “the world came to be” a probability of at least .5. How are we to assess the probability of (B), that whatever comes to be has a cause (a certain sort of necessary condition)? There was a time when this universal causal principle seemed obvious to virtually everyone. Since Hume, the claim no longer strikes philosophers as obviously true. On the other hand, it does not strike them as obviously false, either. Though we think the principle is highly likely, let us cautiously assign it a probability (roughly) of merely .5. What about (C)? Quentin Smith offers three arguments intended to open up the possibility that the universe created itself.¹⁸ But we can put them to one side here, because they have no impact on the position we are taking. Even if for the sake of discussion every point in all three of Smith’s arguments is conceded, all that follows is that it is *possible* that the world caused itself. Smith insists that the atheist’s position cannot be dismissed out of hand. But neither can the theist’s. We have good reason to think the existence of a creator, an originator, is more than a remote possibility.

We want to emphasize how conservative our estimates concerning the likelihood of an originator are. We have said that each of the three premises just discussed is *at least* equiprobable with its contradictory. But at least two of the propositions would be assigned a higher probability by most people: proposition (B) is often taken to be self-evident, and (C) is scarcely ever denied, even by atheists. The conjunction of the three propositions may have a probability considerably higher than .125.

IV. Drawing conclusions: the alternative approach.

So we now have at our disposal the general principle established by the Homer example, and we have a key claim concerning an originator. We are equipped to mount the following argument:

- (1) If the existence of some being *x* is problematic, but not exceedingly improbable, then the question of whether *x* exists has not adequately been considered unless communications widely alleged to have come from *x* have been considered.
- (2) While the existence of an originator is problematic, it is not exceedingly improbable.
- (3) If the question of whether an originator exists has not adequately been considered unless communications widely alleged to have come from the originator have been considered, then the question of

whether God exists has not adequately been considered unless the content of some major revelatory claims has been considered.

(4) So the question of whether God exists has not adequately been considered unless the content of some major revelatory claims has been considered.

The first two premises of this argument, of course, have been established in the preceding two sections.

It should not take much work to see that premise (3) is true. The requirement that one must take into account the content of putative communications in order to investigate the existence of a mere originator is, indeed, surprising. But once that point is recognized, (3) should be easy to accept. If one must look at the content of putative communications even to establish the existence of a bare originator, apart from the originator's properties, then *a fortiori* it is important to look at putative communications if one is interested in whether the originator might have a property such as goodness.

The point may be illustrated by recalling our example involving SETI, the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence. Examining potential communications from possibly-existing alien beings helps us judge whether aliens do actually exist. If we decide that there is a good chance alien minds are out there, we will want to know something about the characteristics of those intelligences—how smart they are, how good they are, and so on. And to acquire information about these matters we surely will look very closely indeed at messages purporting to come from them.

Obviously, too, anyone interested in determining something about the character of Homer will consult the contents of works he is alleged to have produced. If the question of whether a single author of the *Iliad* existed has not adequately been considered unless communications alleged to have come from the author have been examined, then *a fortiori* the question of whether a single virtuous and praiseworthy author of the *Iliad* existed has not adequately been considered unless the content of the author's putative communications have been studied.

V. An objection to the alternative approach: handling the problem of evil.

In setting out the inadequacies of the standard philosophical approach to investigating revelatory claims we emphasized the seriousness of the problem of evil. Yet our defense of an alternative, nonstandard approach has said little about how the agnostic is to handle that problem. It may be objected that the nonstandard approach fails to present a solution to the problem of evil.

Notice, however, that the agnostic need not judge that there is a solution to the problem of evil to proceed with inquiry into the content of revelatory claims; what is needed is recognition that there may be revelatory claims that, *if true*, provide a satisfactory account of evil. A satisfactory account (we have maintained) will include reference to other-worldly goods. What else will it include? It is hard to say at the outset. It is easy enough to

imagine accounts that clearly would *not* be satisfactory. It will not do, for instance, to be told that the creator plays with human beings as a small, malicious child plays with animals, at whim subjecting them to cruel tortures. This tale, even *if true*, is wholly unsatisfactory for an agnostic seeking evidence of a good God.

An account of evil might be both acceptable *and* incomplete. If a good friend misses an appointment with you, and says that he could not make the appointment because an important but confidential matter came up, you presumably will accept your friend's remarks as a satisfactory explanation of the missed meeting, though it is obviously incomplete. Christianity purports to give an acceptable, though incomplete, account of evil. One who investigates a Christian revelatory claim should not expect the veil to lift completely—at least not in this lifetime. Some obscurity in explanation may be necessary because depth is necessary, and obscurity attends depth. What the agnostic investigator needs to ask is not whether the Christian account of evil is in all details complete, but rather whether the account, *if true*, would be acceptable.

One sort of evil that a revelatory claim fitting for the human condition might not address in any detail is animal suffering (or at least the suffering of nonhuman animals). A revelation that tells us what we need to know and do to be saved may in all sorts of ways fall short of being an exhaustive account of evil: highly technical accounts of natural laws involving animal suffering may easily be omitted. That is consistent with the revelation meeting our deepest needs, and giving a satisfactory account of evil. Explanations in the sciences, after all, almost always butt up against some fact that cannot be accounted for: there were objections to Galileo's theory that could not be answered (in Galileo's day, anyway), but that did not show Galileo's explanatory account was incorrect or unsatisfactory.

Interestingly, many theists and atheists agree that if there is a perfectly good God it is not unreasonable for us to expect some kind of communication from that God. Richard Swinburne, for instance, develops the argument that "if there is a God there is good a priori reason for expecting a propositional revelation."¹⁹ And J.L. Schellenberg presents an argument pointing towards atheism for the claim that if there *were* a God, his existence would be obvious, and reasonable nonbelief would not be an option (in fact, Schellenberg suggests, nonbelief *is* a reasonable option).²⁰ But the arguments Swinburne and Schellenberg set forth actually do not depend on there being a *perfectly* good God: a "basically" good god, a minimally decent god, would do. No human parents are perfectly good parents, but virtually all human parents are good enough that they would seek to establish communication with their children if the children were separated from them and the children could not by themselves close the gap.

It may be pointed out that standard treatments of the problem of evil—treatments belonging to the mainstream approach to natural theology, and included in the paths typically recommended to agnostic inquirers—often appeal to an afterlife as a possible justifying reason for God's permitting evil. Is the approach we are recommending really all that different from the standard approach? We think that it is. Standardly, the possibility of life after death is regarded as a mere logical possibility. *Particular* revelato-

ry claims that there is life after death are not considered in any detail. Thus one obtains nothing like the whole picture. The standard paths ignore (until very late in the game) enigmatic but arresting assertions such as St. Paul's claim that by his suffering he makes up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ. Furthermore, the pronouncements of some religious groups that the doctrine of life after death has been *revealed* is not engaged in the standard treatments. But it is only by examining the claim that the doctrine has been revealed that one can assess evidence concerning the development of doctrine over time, within a particular community.

VI. *An objection to the alternative approach:
the alleged difficulty of investigating revelatory claims.*

A critic may at this point object that evaluating the contents of revelatory claims is impossibly difficult, at least for an agnostic inquirer. Many questions arise. What is the criterion for individuating revelatory claims? How should an inquirer choose one or more claims for investigation? What guidelines should be used in assessing the various claims?

These are serious questions. But several considerations blunt the objection. First, if the intricacy or multitude of revelatory claims completely prevented investigation, then the claims could not sensibly be *dismissed* out of hand, as some critics are inclined to do. Second, an agnostic interested in revelatory claims at some point will end up exploring them if the standard ordering protocol for investigation is pursued, the protocol that accepts presupposition (P), *assuming the inquiry is not abandoned* (that is rather a large assumption, we have suggested). The question is not *whether*, but *when*, the claims will be investigated. Third, an agnostic investigator who is interested in the truth of a revelatory claim will, in the end, have to make an "all things considered" judgment. And the things to be considered include *not only* the difficulty in investigating revelatory claims, but plenty of difficulties on the other side (such as problems in making sense of a thoroughly materialistic world-view). Fourth, it is, in fact, manifestly possible for nonbelievers to evaluate (fairly early in the game) the truth of at least some revelatory claims without expert application of the tools of historians and scripture scholars.

That fourth point needs some explanation. How is an inquirer untrained in scripture scholarship, an agnostic, supposed to evaluate the contents of a revelatory claim?

What agnostics typically will reflect on when investigating revelatory claims are *reports* concerning revelatory claims. Such reports contain dual intermediaries: an individual (one intermediary) makes a report; the report states that God has revealed to an intermediary (who may or may not be identical with the reporter). It may be natural for Christian believers to skip over both sorts of intermediaries, but it is not at all natural for an agnostic to do so: what agnostics actually encounter are claims *human beings* make, and it is impossible for an agnostic to forget that fact. Revelatory claims are asserted by fallible, limited, all-too-human beings with their share of vices and psychological difficulties.

We understand a *report* of a *revelatory claim* to have the form:

S asserts that R revealed that p to T .

S will be an individual or a group of individuals. R will be a super-natural (extra-cosmic) revealer. p will be a proposition. And T will be an individual or a group of individuals. A *revelatory claim* (rather than a report of such a claim) takes the form:

R revealed that p to T .

The following are examples of reports of revelatory claims. Embedded in the reports are revelatory claims themselves.

The Ayatollahs assert that God revealed that the Quran contains God's will for all the world to Muhammad.

The authors of the Catholic Catechism assert that God revealed that the Roman Catholic Church is the oracle of God to the Roman Catholic Church.

My great-aunt asserts that God revealed that only Caucasians will have a place in heaven to her next-door neighbor.

The notion of a report of a revelatory claim can be sharpened in various ways. One might, for instance, require that a specific revelatory claim give some indication of the *means* of the revelation—maybe it came through a dream, or a vision, or a voice. One might require that the time of S 's assertion, or of R 's alleged communication, be indexed. But it is a mistake to think we are not entitled to use a concept for the purposes of inference until we can offer a full definition. In order to explain that a spoon is moving across the table because someone is pulling it with a nearly invisible thread, one need not first define motion—in fact, motion is taken as an undefined primitive concept by physicists. Similarly, we do not need a completely precise account of a revelatory claim in order to make use of the concept. If the project at hand requires it, the account can be detailed.

How is an agnostic to evaluate the contents of a revelatory claim? One may begin by asking, in Newman's words, whether the contents are "what divine goodness would vouchsafe, did it vouchsafe anything." Does the alleged revelation provide moral guidance? Is it noble and elevated and illuminating? Does it satisfy spiritual hunger and heal the deepest of human wounds? Does it offer a satisfactory (though possibly incomplete) account of evil? The questions are not easy to answer. But that is no reason for leaving them out of the picture altogether. One cannot ignore data about whether a revelatory claim is fitting for the human condition and say that one has looked at the total evidential base.

Questions beyond those concerning fittingness can and should be raised in evaluating the content of a revelatory claim. Is the content original? Is the content of the revelatory claim consistent with what we know about history and science—is it free from error on these matters (at least in those instances where it promises to be free from error)? What are the metaphysical presuppositions of the revelation at issue—is the content of the revela-

tory claim consistent with philosophical knowledge? Is the claim self-consistent? Is the doctrinal content of the putative revelation strikingly developed over time, developed in a way that suggests providential guidance through the ages?

Questions concerning the fittingness of a revelatory claim or its originality or development may seem very subjective. But subjective judgments occur in every field. Consider the physicist's judgment that there is a "serious lack of agreement" between a body of data on certain spin variables, P and Q, and the values a particular theory predicts:

Theoretical values of the desired parameters, in this case P and Q, are calculated using one or more standard models. The data points are plotted on the same graph with "error bars" representing the expected statistical variation in the data.

But there is no exactitude about handling the data:

One then *visually compares* the theoretical curves with the data points and judges whether the fit is "extraordinarily good," "very good," "good," "reasonably good," "lacking in agreement" "seriously lacking in agreement," and so on....²¹

The judgment about fit is not formed by applying any sort of algorithm; the judgment is subjective. Now we do not pretend that investigating a revelatory claim for fit with the human condition, or judging whether the development of some revelatory claim displays Newman's "chronic vigor," is just like doing nuclear physics. But when one asks whether the content of some claim is "what divine goodness would vouchsafe," or whether it has displayed a striking staying power over the years, one is posing questions recognizably similar to ones asked by physicists and other scientists.

It is worth noting that the path standardly recommended for those who want philosophically to assess the truth of a revelatory claim—particularly the Christian claim—requires judging the legitimacy of putative miracles prior to investigating the contents of putative revelations. Locke and Swinburne are paradigmatic representatives of the standard attitude towards assessing putative miracles. Both argue that in order to accept Christianity we need to discover a validating miracle (such as the resurrection).²² Most agnostics, however, will be hard pressed to follow the strategy of *first* deciding that it is probable Christ was resurrected, and *then* going on to examine other details of Christian revelatory claims.

Since Locke and Swinburne have already argued that it is at least probable there is a good God by the time they get to evaluation of revelatory claims, it is surprising that they both require a validating miracle for believing Christian claims. Suppose you have no doubts that your college has a dean. Someone says "there is a shocking e-mail out from the dean." Your natural response is to believe that the dean did in fact send an e-mail, and probably, further, that it is at least mildly surprising. You certainly do not think you first must investigate whether your college still has a dean

before you judge how likely it is that the dean sent out an e-mail. If there is a creator, it is not bizarre to think it would communicate to creatures. One can imagine all sorts of nonmiraculous evidences of a divine communication *given that the existence of a divine being is not highly unlikely*.

In any event, the standard approach to building a philosophical case for revelatory claims requires difficult judgments relatively early about the plausibility of miracle claims. Though investigation of the content of revelatory claims will not be trouble-free, it may be easier for the inquiring agnostic and more appealing than evaluation of miracle-claims.

It is worth noting, finally, that even if an agnostic thought it unlikely that examining the contents of revelatory claims would yield a positive pay-off, the examination might be worthwhile. Imagine you are in an abandoned mine, a mine nobody knows you have entered, and are suddenly shut off from the entrance by the collapse of the ceilings both in front of and behind you. It seems pretty clear to you that the oxygen left will last only a short time. As you search in the dark for a way out, you see—or think you see—the faintest line of light passing through what may be a thin passage leading up and out. And you hear—or think you hear—a voice above calling down to you. The climb will be difficult, and you have no proof that it will get you into the open air. But it is hardly foolish to begin climbing.

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NOTES

1. For a more detailed presentation of the argument in this paper, see *The Agnostic Inquirer: Rethinking the Question of Revelation*, Sandra Menssen and Thomas D. Sullivan, forthcoming from Ashgate Publishing.

2. The presupposition marking the standard approach is very common. To begin to get a sense of the breadth and depth of the presupposition consider (a) the order of topics typically addressed in philosophy of religion anthologies; (b) Scott McDonald's account of the order of topics in his entry on "natural theology" in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; (c) the sequencing of Richard Swinburne's cumulative-case argument for Christianity; and (d) Alvin Plantinga's account of sequence in the "Enlightenment model" for investigating religious belief (*Warranted Christian Belief*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 266 - 280).

This is not to say presupposition (P) is highlighted in accounts of the standard approach. It is not. Nor is the presupposition challenged, so far as we can see, by any of the people we have just mentioned. What some *do* question is the very need for an argument.

Though presupposition (P) is frequently found in works in natural theology, we do not suggest that natural theology cannot be done without adhering to (P). Indeed, we take our own work in this essay, work consisting in part of an attack on (P), to be work *in natural theology*. That is to say, we build *philosophical* arguments, arguments whose premises do not appeal to the authority of putative revelations.

3. Theists accustomed to the skillful defenses made by Plantinga, Swinburne, and others may think that agnostics are over-anxious about the

problem of evil. But they surely are not. It is interesting to note the shift in Swinburne's own position on the need to refer to an afterlife to handle the problem of evil. In *The Existence of God* he presented a theodicy that made no reference to the possibility of an afterlife. An inquirer might, Swinburne noted, try to bring in the possibility by appealing to Christian doctrine in the early stages of investigation. But Swinburne rejected this move on the grounds that if the hypothesis of an afterlife is added into the theistic hypothesis, the hypothesis becomes more complicated, and hence has a lower prior probability (pp. 221-222). Once an inquirer has worked through Christian doctrine, Swinburne said, the inquirer can go back over the equations, and come to a fuller understanding of divine goodness. But lots of people—lots of agnostics—will have been stopped short long before reaching the point at which Swinburne urges investigation of Christian doctrine, stopped by the order of inquiry Swinburne used and apparently recommended.

In a more recent work, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, Swinburne says that he is not certain the order of inquiry he earlier recommended will be satisfactory for an agnostic inquirer (he doesn't explicitly refer to agnostics, but one may draw the inference). He writes (p. x):

But, while continuing to endorse the general approach of that book [*The Existence of God*], I have come to believe subsequently that theodicy is a considerably more difficult enterprise than I represented it there. ... I assumed in that book that theodicy does not need to bring in doctrines peculiar to different religions (such as reincarnation in Eastern religions; or life after death in a new world etc. in Christianity), in order to show that the occurrence of evil does not count against the existence of God. I am not fully convinced about that any more.

The theodicy Swinburne goes on to set out explicitly appeals to "the whole Christian doctrinal package taken together." Missing is any account of how the skeptical agnostic inquirer can be motivated to examine that doctrinal package, given the lack of an argument establishing a probable case for the existence of God. (Swinburne's argument in *The Existence of God* that there is a probable case for God's existence depended on the theodicy he expresses doubts about in *Providence and the Problem of Evil*.)

4. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 280. We cannot entirely concur with Plantinga on this point. In the course of the present essay we argue that even if a low probability is initially assigned to the likelihood that a creator exists, it may well be possible to bring the probability up above .5 through philosophical investigation of the content of revelatory claims.

5. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*; Paul Moser, "Divine Hiding" and "A God Who Hides and Seeks," *Philosophia Christi*, Series 2, 3:1, 2001.

6. See Ch. 5 of *On Sophistical Refutations*. Aristotle's main idea seems to be that we fall victim to the fallacy if we fail to detect that a question seemingly *one* really involves *several* questions, and either proceed to answer with a "yes" or a "no" in a way bound to be misleading, or freeze and fail to answer at all. A familiar example (though not Aristotle's) is presented by the question "Have you stopped beating your spouse?" No fallacy is committed, however, if one simply distinguishes the questions at issue, and explains one's answer. There is a truthful answer a nonabusive spouse can give to the question "Have you stopped beating your spouse?" The answer is: "No—I have not stopped beating my spouse, because to stop something you must have been doing it at some point, and I never have beaten my spouse."

7. The definitions of "the fallacy of the complex question" provided by

most logic texts are vague and ill-formed. Irving Copi and Carl Cohen define the fallacy as:

asking a question in such a way as to presuppose the truth of some conclusion buried in that question (*Introduction to Logic*, 10th ed. (New York: Macmillan), p. 183).

But this formulation has us mark innumerable perfectly reasonable questions as fallacious. "Will you pick Sarah up after her classes end today?" presupposes that you exist, and Sarah exists, and Sarah is female, and she has more than one class, and she has more than one class today, and the classes will end today rather than extend past midnight.

8. We thank Professor Jeremiah Reedy of the Classics Department at Macalester College for helpful comments about the history of scholarship on Homer.

9. G.S. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 1.

10. F.A. Wolf, *Prolegomena to Homer*, orig. publ. 1795, trans., intro., notes by Anthony Grafton, Glenn W. Most, James E.G. Zetzel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 5.

11. See Joachim Latacz, *Homer: His Art and His World*, trans. James P. Holoka (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 7 - 8.

12. Wolf, *Prolegomena to Homer*.

13. "Heroic Poetry," *Britannica Online*, accessed 05 August 1998. <<http://www.eb.com:180/cgi-bin/g?DocF=micro/268/58.html>>

14. *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 524.

15. Kirk, p. xv. Some classical scholars (at this point in time apparently a minority) are now arguing there is decent reason to think Homer did have access to writing after all: as the so-called Dark Ages of ancient Greece are illuminated by modern archeology and history and philology some classicists have become convinced that significant aspects of the old Mycenaean aristocratic culture survived the "catastrophic event" (whatever it was) of about 1200 BC that was once thought to have extinguished Mycenaean civilization. But whether Homer did or did not read and write does not affect the legitimacy of the reasoning of the novice classicist.

16. By "universe" we mean *this* universe, a space that includes all matter and energy, and nothing beyond that space. (Some theorists have proposed that this universe is not alone, that there are alternate universes to the one we inhabit, entirely unconnected to ours.) The universe is commonly thought to proceed from a singularity, and the singularity commonly thought to be a physical reality such as gravity, mass, or charge, that has an apparent value of infinity. The concept of a singularity as applied to the entity appearing before the big bang is controversial within science, but these controversies can be ignored here. Details concerning alternative understandings of the universe's beginnings do not affect our argument, so long as it is understood that we are not claiming the world came to be in the course of an already-existing time.

17. Thus when we speak of "the originator" we will *not* mean "the one and only originator or cause." Rather, we mean "either the one and only originator, or one of the originators."

18. See Quentin Smith, "The Reason the Universe Exists is that it Caused Itself to Exist," *Philosophy* 74 (1999), pp. 579 - 586.

19. Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 83; the argument stretches through chapter five

of the book.

20. J.L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

21. Ronald N. Giere, *Explaining Science: A Cognitive Approach* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 190.

22. In one way, the requirement of a miracle might be seen as an incidental feature of Swinburne's approach to revelation; at times he seems to allow the theoretical possibility that the *content* of a revelatory claim might suffice. But in fact, he asserts, none of the major revelatory traditions contains a content that suffices for credibility.

The problem faced by the inquirer following Swinburne's approach is exacerbated by his views on how one identifies the repository of true revelation. Swinburne wants to rely exclusively on evidence about early church history in judging whether there was a resurrection, because he wants to pin down a validating miracle and identify the "original" revelation before identifying the church or tradition that is today the oracle of God. Once the original revelation is identified, he thinks, one is positioned to ask which among the later institutions or churches is the "closest continuer" of the group receiving the original revelation. But one needs maybe a .4 or .5 or .6 probability that the resurrection occurred *given the evidence about early history* if one is going to get what counts as a substantiating miracle. Few agnostics are able to accept such an estimate. With an enhanced base that includes a long tradition of developing doctrine, it might be reasonable for one to believe Jesus was resurrected *because* one believes that a particular community has received the fullness of divine revelation, and this community proclaims the resurrection.