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NATURAL THEOLOGY, ITS "DWINDLING PROBABILITIES" AND "LACK OF RAPPORT"

Richard Swinburne

This paper comments on the other papers in this special issue of FAITH AND PHILOSOPHY on Natural Theology. It claims that most people today need both bare natural theology (to show that there is a God) and ramified natural theology (to establish detailed doctrinal claims), and that Christian tradition has generally claimed that cogent arguments of natural theology (of both kinds) are available. Plantinga's "dwindling probabilities" objection against ramified natural theology is shown to have no force when different pieces of evidence are fed into the arguments at different stages. But showing the cogency of arguments of natural theology involves the lengthy process of helping people to see the correctness of certain moral views.

I understand by bare natural theology the attempt to demonstrate the existence of God by arguments (deductive or inductive) beginning from premises describing very general and evident public phenomena. Most of the contributors to this issue of *Faith and Philosophy* are in favour of this enterprise; and Del Ratzsch and Tim O'Connor have both given us components of their own natural theology. But all that this enterprise would show is the existence of God; it would tell us nothing about why he made us, how he wants us to live on Earth, and what he plans to do with us after death. Bare theism is a theoretical belief which seldom moves people to deep emotion or heroic action. For that we need a more ramified theism such as Christianity or Islam. These religions (among others) claim that God has intervened in history to do certain things for us and to reveal certain things (including that he has done the former things). It is a natural extension of bare natural theology to produce arguments from generally agreed historical data for the detailed claims of a particular religion. This enterprise we may call ramified natural theory. Both Stephen Davis and Harold Netland see a need for ramified natural theology, as I do myself, to support the particular claims of Christianity; and Stephen Davis has given us some of his own ramified natural theology. In this paper I shall first emphasize the need for natural theology, both bare and ramified, suggesting that Alan Padgett does not bring out adequately how important it is; and then consider two difficulties for natural theology, raised by the two other contributors – the problem of "dwindling probabilities", raised by Dan Howard-Snyder; and the problem raised by William Wood that natural theology does not often convince unbelievers, or stir anyone very much to devotion.

I

Unless we have a strong basic belief that there is a God, we need to be given reason to believe that there is a God despite objections from the fact of suffering and the fact that God is not evidently present by answering our prayers all the time. And just the same applies to the detailed credal claims of Christianity which Plantinga calls "the great things of the Gospel". Unless it seems very evident to the reader of the Gospels or the hearer of a sermon that those great things are true, we need reasons to believe them, despite the powerful objections by modern critics to the historicity of the Gospels, and the fact that there are other religions with rival messages which seem equally evident to their adherents. And "reasons" are what philosophers knock into the more rigorous shape of arguments.

All of us have many basic propositions, that is propositions which we have some inclination to believe independently of the extent to which they are rendered probable or improbable by other propositions which we have some inclination to believe; those basic propositions which we are more inclined to believe than to disbelieve constitute our basic beliefs. I suggest that in general we are right to attribute to all contingent basic propositions a logical probability proportional to the strength of our inclination to believe them, merely on the evidence that we have an inclination of this strength. All basic beliefs about contingent matters are in this sense properly or rightly basic; that this holds is what I call the Principle of Credulity.¹ If you believe strongly that you are looking at an elephant now or you saw one yesterday, then very probably you are looking at an elephant now or saw one yesterday -unless other propositions which you believe make these things improbable. And if it seems to you strongly that you are aware of the presence of God, then very probably you are—again, unless other propositions which you believe make this improbable.

Our basic propositions constitute our evidence supporting or opposing, that is rendering probable to different degrees, various non-basic propositions. A number of basic beliefs of mine that I have observed different iron balls placed in tubs of water sink to the bottom of the tub render it fairly probable that all iron balls sink in water. In turn such a non-basic proposition may render less probable some basic proposition. The non-basic proposition about all iron balls may diminish the probability of a new basic proposition that I observed a new iron ball float on water. The extent of support for a non-basic proposition, and the extent to which the latter affects the posterior probability of the new basic proposition depends in part on the initial probabilities of the basic propositions, that is how strong is the subject's inclination to believe them independently of the extent to which they are rendered probable by other propositions which the subject has some inclination to believe.

Among the criteria of what is evidence for what (that is, our inductive criteria of what makes what probable) is, I suggest, a Principle of Testimony, that both what others tell us about their own experiences and also what they tell us about what everyone "knows" to be so, is probably so. Let us call the principle which says that what others tell us about their own experiences the Principle of Individual Testimony; and what others

tell us about “what everyone knows to be true” the Principle of Authorative Testimony. Without either principle we would know nothing apart from what we have perceived or experienced for ourselves. Without the second principle we would know little about geography, history, or science, since our knowledge of these things depends on what we are told by school teachers and others as established fact. Yet surely we are justified in believing what we are told both about the experiences of others, and what we are told on authority; and rightly judge it on our limited evidence to be probably true. This principle may itself be a basic principle; or a principle rendered probable (in the light of other inductive criteria) by our own experience that when we check what other people tell us, it usually turns out to be true. In the course of time we need to qualify this principle – we find certain people are not to be trusted in certain respects. But our grounds for believing the latter is so often the testimony of many other people that these particular people are untrustworthy on those respects. The Principle of Testimony remains a central inductive principle.²

Now, even if we ourselves do not have a strong basic belief that there is a God (we may not have had a strong religious experience encapsulating such a belief), we may have been told by one or more other people that they have had such experiences, and – other things being equal – the Principle of Testimony tells us that that gives us good reason for believing that there is a God. But more common in the Middle Ages, and not without influence at other periods, was the argument from authority. Many a medieval villager believed that there was a God because his parents or the village priest or some visiting friar told him that there is a God, because – they said – it was well authenticated that miracles (which could be performed only by God) occurred, or simply that wise men had established that there is a God.³ In virtue of the Principle of Testimony, the villager was right to believe what he was told (it was probably true) – in the absence of counter-evidence (which may be simply counter-testimony, other people telling our villager differently). One strong piece of evidence that others are telling you what they believe strongly and so believe to be very probable is that this belief manifestly makes a great difference to the way they live, that relying on this belief they have come to live in a way otherwise quite unnatural. Even if we do not have their experiences and cannot appreciate the arguments, the fact that people have come to live sacrificial lives in consequence of those experiences and arguments is some evidence of the strength of those experiences and the worth of those arguments. But people differ in respect of whether they have much of this kind of evidence on authority, and whether it is nullified by the existence of people, apparently at least as learned, who tell them that there is no God.

We however live in an age of religious scepticism when there are good arguments against theism known to most people, and there are always authorative atheists as well as authorative theists. In this situation, unless someone has a strong basic belief (and I emphasize “strong” basic belief), that there is a God, their belief needs to be backed up by arguments for the existence of God which start from basic beliefs held very strongly by theist and atheist alike and proceed thence by criteria shared between theist and atheist. To produce such arguments is the aim of bare natural theology. It

starts from the most general natural phenomena – the existence of the world, its conformity to natural laws, and such like and attempts to argue thence deductively or by criteria of inductive reasoning used in other areas of inquiry. And the historical truths of the Christian religion need to be backed up by additional inductive arguments beginning from historical data recognized by theist and atheist alike.

Though more people need bare natural theology today than ever before, it has always been needed; and almost all Christian theologians of the first 1750 years of Christianity (as well as several of the biblical authors) have taught that there are cogent arguments of natural theology available for those who need them. Gregory of Nyssa saw that converting people to the Christian faith needed arguments directed to establishing the points of Christian doctrine which those people doubted:

It is necessary to regard the opinions which the persons have taken up, and to frame your argument in accordance with the error into which each has fallen, by advancing in each discussion certain principles and reasonable propositions, that thus, through what is agreed upon on both sides, the truth may conclusively be brought to light. Should he say there is no God, then, from the consideration of the skilful and wise economy of the Universe he will be brought to acknowledge that there is a certain overmastering power manifested through these channels. If, on the other hand, he should have no doubt as to the existence of deity, but should be inclined to entertain the presumption of a plurality of gods, then we will adopt [other arguments].⁴

And if the audience is Jewish, then again different arguments are needed.

It is sometimes not immediately obvious that some biblical or patristic argument is a piece of natural theology, because it takes the existence of a “god” of some sort for granted and argues to his goodness or his wisdom. But it is natural theology if it argues that the power in charge of the Universe is not just any “god”, but God – omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. Given that, there are various short passages of the Old and New Testaments which are pieces of natural theology,⁵ as well as longer passages in *The Wisdom of Solomon*. So many of the Christian fathers of the first millennium A.D. have their brief few paragraphs of natural theology, arguing especially that the regular behaviour of the natural world points to an omnipotent and omniscient God as its creator. To cite but a few examples: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, II, 1-9; Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, chapter 1; Augustine, *On Free Will*, 2.12.33; Maximus the Confessor, *Difficulties*, 10.35; and St. John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, 1.3.

The brief paragraphs of the fathers of the first millennium became the long treatises of the medieval West; and Anselm, Bonaventure, Aquinas and Scotus, developed bare natural theology at great length. And the tradition continued with Leibniz and Clark, Butler and Paley. It was only as a result of what I can only regard as rather bad arguments by Hume, Kant, and followers of Darwin, that natural theology went out of favour for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Similarly, it is hard to read the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, and I

Corinthians without seeing them as claiming that various historical events (above all, the Resurrection) occurred and that others can know these things on the testimony of the apostles to have seen them. St Luke tells us that in writing his Gospel, he was one of many who were putting into writing what they had been told by those who, "from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word", and he was doing so in order that the recipient of his Gospel, Theophilus, "may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed".⁶ The earliest writings of the next century appealed to the New Testament not as authoritative scripture, but as historical evidence. Clement tells us that the apostles' doubts were "set at rest by the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead"⁷. Ignatius⁸ and Justin⁹ (or the author of *On the Resurrection* attributed to him) both emphasize that the disciples touched the risen Christ; and Justin writes that they were "by every kind of proof persuaded that it was [Jesus] Himself". Irenaeus appeals for the truth of his teaching to Polycarp "who was instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ".¹⁰

With the third century different strains of apologetic became far more prevalent. The conversion of the Western world without force of arms and the apparent miracles associated therewith, were used as evidence of the truth of Christian doctrines; and many people were in a position to rely on authority (because of the shortage of authoritative atheists). Detailed historical arguments (though by no means absent) were proffered less frequently. This move away from detailed historical arguments to arguments of other kinds in favour of the Christian doctrines occurred, I believe, because as time went by, the chain of witnesses required to authenticate the historical events by individual testimony became longer and longer and so an appeal to the testimony of witnesses became more and more open to the suspicion that there was at some stage misreporting. We however are in a much better position than the medieval world to detect (by comparing texts) where scribes have miscopied, and to trace common sources of events reported by more than one author. We have historical knowledge and expertise which puts us in a position as good as that of the second century to assess the detailed historical evidence (to be supported by the evidence of natural theology) for the historical claims of Christianity.

Most of us need (both bare and ramified) natural theology, including historical argument in order to have probably true religious beliefs, and Christian tradition claims that these are available. So why should Alan Padgett restrict natural theology to the philosophical classroom? Like most arguments for most things, arguments for the existence of God can be expounded at different levels of sophistication; and arguments expounded in terms of the probability calculus are for a minority. But the belief of so many since the seventeenth century that there is a God has depended on simple sermons which themselves expound somewhat more sophisticated writings such as Paley's *Natural Theology* or C.S. Lewis's popular apologetics; and their belief in the historicity of the Resurrection has depended on books such as Frank Morison's *Who Moved the Stone?*¹¹ Without them the beliefs of many Christians would be ill justified (in the sense of being improbable given their basic propositions), so ill justified as to make their practice of religion irrational. Contrary to Padgett, the "Christian faith" of

many people ought to "depend on the practice of philosophy"¹² at some level of rigour - if they lack enough religious experience or authoritative testimony. For many people it is simply not possible to follow Barth (as approved by Padgett) in interpreting natural theology "according to revelation and not the other way around"¹³ because they need reason in order to believe that the Christian revelation is true. Barth stresses the importance of "grace" and "faith". But I do not deny the role either of grace - we may need grace to help us to see that the arguments work, or of faith - which is a matter of how we act on our beliefs, whether in the light of them we commit ourselves to Christ.

Despite Wood's rhetorical question "Has anyone ever become convinced of God's existence after mastering, say, Richard Swinburne's inductive arguments in favour of its Bayesian probability?"¹⁴ I must report that some people have even told me that reading my books has made a significant difference to their religious beliefs. But maybe it was the prose of my simpler writing rather than the symbolism of my more complicated writing that has had the stated effect! Arguments for anything can be expressed with different degrees of rigour, and arguments in simple prose may be the most that most readers can grasp. Yet for more sophisticated readers, including professional philosophers, a probabilistic argument often needs to be expressed in a formal way in order to bring out its force and show that it does not commit any probabilistic non-sequiturs. All that the formalism does is to render the argument of the loose prose more rigorous. People are very different from each other, and they come to a belief that the Nicene Creed is true by many different routes; but some form of natural theology is, I suggest, quite important for quite a lot of inhabitants of the modern world.

II

So we need natural theology, but do its arguments work? That depends on which arguments we are discussing and on the worth of many different objections to them. But there is one recent objection, directed mainly against ramified natural theology, which has received wide currency and which it would be appropriate to discuss here since it has been raised by Dan Howard-Snyder. The objection from "dwindling probabilities" is the name given by Alvin Plantinga to what he sees as a major difficulty in the way of producing cogent historical arguments for the truth of the central elements of Christian doctrine¹⁵ (G), a problem which he finds in my own attempt to do so in my book *Revelation*.¹⁶ In order to pursue ramified natural theology, Plantinga claims correctly, we need first bare natural theology to argue for the existence of God (T) on the basis of all our background knowledge (K) ("the totality of what we know apart from theism"). And Plantinga *seems* to acknowledge that arguments from background knowledge accepted by theist and atheist alike (presumably the "we" to whom he refers) will be probabilistic. They will show that there is some probability on that evidence that there is a God - $P(T/K)$; I argued elsewhere that that value is more than 0.5. Then, as Plantinga represents my style of argument, we must consider the probability, given (T&K), that (A) "God would make some kind of revela-

tion...to humankind" – $P(A/T\&K)$. But we then need to argue that "such a revelation would contain G"; and Plantinga suggests one way to do this is to ask for the probability of (B), "Jesus's teachings were such that they could be sensibly interpreted and extrapolated to G", given $(K\&T\&A)$ – that is $P(B/K\&T\&A)$. But why suppose the teachings are true? Perhaps K plus what has been established so far makes it probable that (C) "Jesus rose from the dead" – $P(C/K\&T\&A\&B)$. And maybe it is probable, given all that, that (D) "In raising Jesus from the dead, God endorsed his teachings". But was he endorsing the extrapolation of those teachings to G? Perhaps it is probable that (E), "Jesus founded a church to interpret his teaching, and that that church which is still extant teaches G, and God preserves it from error." So call the probability that God endorsed the extrapolation of Jesus's teachings in this way, given the previous evidence, $P(E/K\&T\&A\&B\&C\&D)$. But to get the probability that G is true by this route on the only evidence we have (K), it is necessary to multiply these probabilities together: $P(E/K) = P(T/K) \times P(A/T\&K) \times P(B/T\&K\&A) \times P(C/K\&T\&A\&B) \times P(D/K\&T\&A\&B\&C) \times P(E/K\&T\&A\&B\&C\&D)$. Since E entails G, Plantinga seems to suppose, the probability of G ($P(G/K)$) can be taken as tantamount to $P(E/K)$. At each stage of multiplication, there will be a diminution of probability. Each individual probability may be quite high; and Plantinga suggests for these probabilities values which he regards as "generous" around 0.8 or 0.9. If we multiply together the particular values suggested by Plantinga for these individual probabilities, we get a value for the resulting probability of 0.35. So the attempt to establish G by historical argument cannot give it a very high probability, not at all the kind of probability we need if we are "to know the great truths of the gospel".¹⁷

Now, strictly speaking – as Plantinga acknowledges, but takes no further – $P(G/K)$ is the sum of the probabilities of the different routes to it. G might be true without some of these intermediate propositions being true. For any h, e and k, $P(h/k) = P(h/e\&k) \times P(e/k) + P(h/\sim e\&k) \times P(\sim e/k)$. $P(h/e\&k)$ may be much larger than $P(h/\sim e\&k)$, and $P(e/k)$ may be much larger than $P(\sim e/k)$, and so to simplify my argument from k to h, I may say "k, therefore probably e; e, therefore probably h", and the probability accruing to h by this route will be $P(h/e\&k) \times P(e/k)$. But to get an accurate value for $P(h/k)$, the lesser probability must be added in; there is some low probability that, given k, e may be false; and some low probability that even if e is false, h is still true. Hence Plantinga rightly says that $P(G/K)$ is "equal to or greater than" the value obtained by multiplying the probabilities along the line of argument which he discusses. And if the probabilities along the other routes from K to G are significant, they could make a significant difference to the overall probability. Maybe for example, in raising Jesus from the dead, God was not endorsing his teaching – so not-D; but God was endorsing only the teaching of the church which Jesus founded, although what it taught was not a sensible extrapolation from Jesus's teachings (and so not-B). Maybe this is not very probable, but to get the overall value of $P(G/K)$ we need to add in the value of the probability of G along the route $K \rightarrow T \rightarrow A \rightarrow (\text{not } -B) \rightarrow C \rightarrow (\text{not } -D) \rightarrow E \rightarrow G$. As it is, Plantinga's resultant value in fact assesses the probability on K of the whole conjunction $(G\&E\&T\&A\&B\&C\&D)$, which will (by a theorem of the

calculus) inevitably be (no greater than and normally) less than the probability of any one or lesser number of conjuncts on the same evidence. The more you say, the more you are likely to make a mistake. Yet G may be true without some of these conjuncts being true. In this particular example the issue becomes complicated in virtue of the fact that some of the conjuncts (E&T&A&B&C&D) are themselves part of G – that “Jesus rose from the dead” (C) is itself one of the “great truths of the Gospel”. The more such conjuncts there is, the greater is the probability given those conjuncts, of G (for this element of G will already have been proved). But some of the conjuncts are not part of G and so my general point remains that the probabilities will not dwindle as rapidly as Plantinga’s long discussion might lead the unwary reader to suppose; and his formal acknowledgement of this point should be given more attention. There will never be an increase in probability if we consider all the different routes to the conclusion, but the diminution of probability may well be significantly less.

A defender of the argument from dwindling probabilities may acknowledge this point, but emphasize that all the same the longer the route of the argument (or the more conjuncts involved in the conclusion), the less probable is the conclusion; and so suggest that it is not plausible to suppose that an argument of any length would yield a very probable conclusion. In rebuttal I make two points. The first is that the argument from dwindling probabilities applies, in so far as it does apply, not only to theological arguments, but to any argument of some length in history or science (or to any conjunction of propositions in these areas). Yet surely in these areas we can reach conclusions which are very probable.

Suppose I take a random sample of 90 out of 100 widgets and find that they are all red (k). What is the probability that all 100 will be red (h). One would suppose that $P(h/k)$ would be high; 0.9 would surely be a reasonable estimate. But this probability is the probability that, given k, the 91st widget will be red (e_{91}) times the probability given (k and e_{91}) that the 92nd widget will be red (e_{92}) times the probability given (k and e_{91} and e_{92}) that the 93rd widget will be red, and so on. For $P(h/k)$ to equal 0.9, each of these intermediate probabilities will have to average more than 0.98. So sometimes intermediate probabilities may be very high indeed. (In this example, since all the intermediate propositions are themselves conjuncts of the resulting conclusion, k; there is no ‘or greater than’ to be added to the ‘equal to’. I noted above that *some* (but not all) of the intermediate propositions of the argument for G are themselves part of G.). Intermediate probabilities will be very high to the extent to which the intermediate propositions fit very well together with k and with each other.

Or consider a single page of a serious work of history, about the life of Julius Caesar for example, containing many propositions. On the same evidence, the first proposition will be more probable than the conjunction of the first and the second, and that will be more probable than the conjunction of the first, second, and third and so on. What is the probability that every proposition on the page is true? It will certainly be less on the same evidence than the probability that the first one is true. But whether the difference is significant or not depends on what the evidence is, what the historical propositions are and how well they fit together. No worthwhile general

point can be made. If the author uses some of these propositions as evidence for others, then again the former will be more probable than the conjunction of the former with the latter. But again everything depends on the details; and surely many reputable historical works have pages on which all their assertions are highly probable on the evidence adduced by the author.

My second point against the significance of "dwindling probabilities" is to note that the "dwindling" arises from the fact that in Plantinga's discussion he supposes that all the evidence is put on the table at the beginning. K is supposed to be all evidence relevant not merely to T, but to C and D and so on. And so the dwindling arises from the fact that as you add to the hypothesis more conjuncts (as Plantinga does in effect when he considers only the main line of argument to the conclusion), the theorem of the calculus again applies that the probability of a conjunction on some evidence is never greater than (and normally less than) the probability of a smaller number of the conjuncts on the same evidence. But the force of evidence may often be better appreciated if we do not put all our evidence on the table at the beginning; and instead as we add each conjunct to the hypothesis, we also add a new piece of evidence. In this way the probability may increase, not decrease. $P(p \& q / r \& s)$ may be greater or less than $P(p / r)$ – it all depends what are the conjuncts of the hypothesis and of the evidence. That the force of a probabilistic argument may often be seen much more clearly if it is articulated in one way rather than another is suggested by Stephen Davis's paper which seeks to articulate the "Mad/Bad/God" argument in a way different from the dwindling probabilistic way.¹⁸

In my book *Revelation*, I did pursue the policy of feeding in the evidence gradually – contrary to the account which Plantinga gives of what I was doing. I began by alluding to a result which I claimed to have established elsewhere, that "there is an all-powerful and all-good God".¹⁹ I then went on to argue that "there is good a priori reason for expecting a propositional revelation, in connection with an atoning incarnation; and for expecting some means to be provided for pursuing and rightly interpreting that revelation for new centuries and cultures."²⁰ I then claimed that further historical evidence made it fairly probable in outline what Jesus taught;²¹ that he founded a church²²; and that he announced that his life and death constituted an atonement for our sin.²³ I suggested also²⁴ that there was some evidence of witnesses (to the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus) to a super-miracle (of the Resurrection) – though I explicitly did not give that evidence there. I claimed that there was historical evidence²⁵ that the first recipients of reports of the Resurrection, the Jews, would naturally construe it as God's signature on the teaching of Jesus. I went on to claim²⁶ that by normal criteria of identifying a continuing society – continuity of aim (which in the case of the church includes continuity of doctrine), and continuity of organisation – there was good historical evidence that the Christian church (conceived very broadly as including Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism) on the whole preserved these features.²⁷ So at each stage of the argument new historical evidence was introduced. I acknowledge however that I did not bring out what was going on with the aid of the probability calculus²⁸. But I am happy to do so here.

In my more recent book *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* I have

made the probabilistic structure of my arguments much clearer. I begin by drawing attention to my argument elsewhere from the evidence of natural theology (k) to the existence of God (t), and I repeat my claim that $P(t/k) > 1/2$; though in order not to seem to exaggerate the force of this evidence I suggested that we suppose only that $P(t/k) = 1/2$. There is then in effect an argument to the conjunction of the Incarnation of God in Jesus (d)²⁹ and his Resurrection (h) from k and the combined historical data of the evidence of the life of Jesus (e_1), the testimony of witnesses to the empty tomb and his post-Resurrection appearances (e_3), and the evidence that no other known prophet in human history led the right kind of life which ended in the right kind of way with a super-miracle such as the Resurrection (e_2). Taking $e = (e_1 \& e_2 \& e_3)$ and noting that d entails t , I claim that $P(t \& h \& d / k \& e) > P(t/k)$. I won't go through the details of the argument here, but suffice it to say that everything turns on e being very improbable given not- t . This argument, as so expressed, is evidently and in a way made explicit by the formalism not subject to the "dwindling probabilities" objection, because the evidence is fed in in two separate stages. Of course if I had put all the evidence on the table at the beginning, then probabilities would have diminished— $P(t/k \& e) > P(t \& h \& d / k \& e)$. But if the detailed formalized argument of *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* with its suggested input probabilities which gives a very high value to $P(t \& h \& d / k \& e)$ is correct, the "dwindling" is irrelevant. Most of the "great truths of the Gospel" are either entailed by or rendered highly probable by $(t \& h \& d)$, and so the argument is well on the way to the conclusion of the unformalized argument of *Revelation*. A critic should focus his criticism on the details of arguments for a ramified theism rather than rely on the "principle of dwindling probabilities".³⁰

III

But if the arguments of bare and ramified natural theology are cogent, why is it that so few who have studied and understood them have been convinced immediately by them? Part of the answer must be that humans are only partly rational. We are subject to irrational influences including ones which lead us not to pay proper attention to arguments which would lead us to see that we ought to change our life-style, and lead us to hide from ourselves the conclusions of such arguments. This point is obvious. We have a built-in inclination to reject arguments which might lead us to have to give up smoking, confine sexual intercourse to marriage, campaign against racism or whatever – if that would mean a change in our life style. And becoming a Christian involves an enormous change of lifestyle. The same point applies to a Christian becoming an atheist; he has a natural resistance to atheistic arguments because accepting them would involve giving up church friendships, perhaps a cooling of relationships with his family, an acknowledgement of the worthlessness of much that he has done in the past, and so on. But it is implausible to suppose that this explains all, or even most cases of refusal to accept theistic arguments – given the assumption that they are in fact cogent arguments. A major reason for their lack of success is surely the fact that the solutions to the prob-

lems of evil and divine hiddenness which the natural theologian may propose, are not initially morally appealing. The problem of evil would be totally insoluble if the only good states were kicks of pleasure, and feelings of well-being, and the only bad states were pains and unhappiness. For an omnipotent God could certainly give us the former without the latter; and a perfectly good God would surely do so. But the more you emphasize that far better than the undoubtedly good states of pleasure and feelings of well-being, are actions of freely helping others and forming one's character for good, and also simply being of use to others (even when this is not the result of one's choice); and far worse than the undoubtedly bad states of pain and unhappiness are actions of hurting and deceiving others, and allowing yourself to become a naturally bad person, then the problem of evil begins to look soluble. And divine hiddenness seems less of a problem the more you come to believe that it is a great and painful good for a parent to keep his distance somewhat from his child and allow the latter to develop in his own way; and that for God keeping his distance somewhat means keeping his existence somewhat hidden.

Accepting that the arguments work often requires a change of view about what a perfectly good God would do, and so a change of one's general moral view. Moral views result from reflection on the goodness or badness of many different kinds of actions or states of affairs, and trying to formulate principles which capture what is good or bad in those actions or states.³¹ You often need to reflect a lot, and to experience for yourself different states and actions before your moral perspective changes. I'm not claiming that it is a necessary truth about all rational beings, that this process of reflection and experience takes a considerable time, but it is a contingent truth about many humans. Merely understanding the probability calculus won't tell you the sort of universe a perfectly good God would make, but only if someone has a certain view about that will he give a high value to this kind of universe being the sort of universe a perfectly good God would make, and only if he does will he see that the arguments work. And that is why Wood is right in claiming that "natural theology must seek to persuade people that they can (and do) share rapport with God".³² And reflection on how a good parent of enormous power and knowledge, would deal with his children, needs imagination which can be developed by "rhetoric" and by stories (including science fiction stories) of good and bad behaviour, to get us to understand the sort of goodness which a perfectly good God would have –and must have if the arguments to his existence are to work.

For bare theism God has to be made attractive as he is in his essential nature. A ramified Christian theism needs to make it probable that Jesus is God. That involves making it probable that Jesus lived in the way a perfectly good God would live on earth. And there is no better way for a person to begin to find that probable than to read the four Gospels. Of course it needs to be shown first that they are moderately probable accounts of the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. But, ramified natural theology having achieved that, part of the final step requires finding Jesus uniquely attractive; and the Gospel stories can help us to find that necessary "rapport" with Jesus.

And there is more to faith than mere "belief". Faith involves trusting commitment. The more attractive the God described by some religion, the more people will want to know him and enjoy him forever. And if they are given reason to suppose that they can do this only if they follow a certain religious path (of worship and service), they will feel the inclination to follow that religious path. Even if the arguments for the existence of this God do not strike them as very strong, so long as they believe that following one path is more likely to reach such a God than is following another, they will follow the former. This venture of faith may well in the course of time lead to stronger belief in the existence of God.³³

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NOTES

1. Note that this principle applies only to beliefs about logically contingent matters. The logical probability of a logically necessary truth on any evidence is 1, whether or not the subject believes it; and the logical probability of a logically necessary falsehood on any evidence is 0, whether or not the subject believes it. There are also a few minor qualifications on the degree of probability conferred on a contingent basic proposition by one's inclination to believe it, which I discuss in my book *Epistemic Justification*, Clarendon Press, 2001, pp. 139-51.

2. For elaboration of the points made in the last few sentences, see the fuller discussion of the Principle of Testimony in my *Epistemic Justification*, pp. 123-7.

3. "I am sure there are many who never had a showing or vision, but only the normal teaching of Holy Church, and who love God better than I do" – Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (transl.) E. Spearing, Penguin Books, 1998, p. 54.

4. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, Prologue. (Transl. W. Moore and H.A. Wilson, *Selected Writings of Gregory of Nyssa*, Parker and Co., Oxford, 1893.)

5. In my and Padgett's sense of "natural theology", and not just "theology of nature". There are several examples of such biblical passages in James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, Clarendon Press, 1993. My favourite such passage is one which Barr does not discuss – Jeremiah 33, 20-1 and 25-6 where the prophet argues from the extent of the creation to the power of the creator; and from its regular behaviour ('the covenant of night and day') to the creator's reliability.

6. Luke 1. 1-4.

7. Clement's *First Epistle to the Corinthians* 42.

8. *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 3.

9. *On the Resurrection* (*The Writings of the Fathers*, vol. 1. Justin Martyr and Athenagoras, transl. M. Dodds, G. Reigh and B.P. Pratten, T. and T. Clark, 1868.)

10. *Against Heresies* 3.3.4. (*The Writings of the Fathers*, vol. 5. Irenaeus, vol. I, transl. A. Roberts and W.H. Rambault, T. and T. Clark 1868)

11. F. Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?*, Faber and Faber, 1930

12. This issue p. 496.

13. This issue p. 499.

14. This issue p. 520.

15. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, Oxford University Press,

2000, pp. 272-80.

16. Richard Swinburne, *Revelation. From Metaphor to Analogy*, Clarendon Press, 1992, chs 5, 6, 7 & 8.

17. Plantinga, op. cit. p. 280.

18. I write this without necessarily endorsing Davis's argument. There is, as Davis recognizes, a major problem about the truth of the first premiss "Jesus claimed, explicitly or implicitly, to be divine". I discuss this in Chapter 6 of my book *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Clarendon Press, 2003). And it is not obvious to me that (3b) and (3c) have probabilities as low as Davis ascribes to them, unless we use a far wider range of evidence than that which Davis can discuss in a journal article.

19. *Revelation* pp. 69-70.

20. op. cit. p. 83.

21. op. cit. p. 106.

22. op. cit. p. 107.

23. op. cit. p. 109.

24. op. cit. p. 112-13.

25. op. cit. p. 111-12.

26. op. cit. ch 8. Plantinga notes (*Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 278 n 70) that to apply the criterion of "continuity of doctrinal teaching" we would have to know already "what Jesus intended his church to teach, but then we can't use this test to determine what Jesus intended his church to teach." True, but that is no objection to my strategy, since I claimed (see above) that we have independent historical evidence about what Jesus taught and so intended his church to teach. This evidence may not be sufficient to establish the latter, but it is enough to rule out from satisfying both tests some resulting societies which preserve continuity of organization with the original church. And evidence about the extent of continuity of organization may suffice to rule out other resulting societies as proper interpreters of what Jesus taught.

27. I do also think that one of these three branches of Christianity preserved continuity of aims and organization better than did the other two!

28. If I produce a new edition of *Revelation*, I hope to articulate the probabilistic structure of the argument there in a more formal way.

29. I set out the argument of the book here in a highly condensed form which nevertheless brings out its essential features. In the Appendix entitled "Formalizing the Argument" 'd' does not appear; instead there is 'c', 'God becomes Incarnate'. But I also claim (p. 214) that "given (e&k) and c ... it would be *immensely* improbable that the Incarnation took place or will take place in any prophet except Jesus". ("Immensely" is not italicised in the original).

30. Harold Netland considers that the "particular experiences and metaphysical claims in Buddhism and Hinduism" and other major religious traditions "are relevant to the calculation of the overall probability of Christian theism", and that "it is far from clear how such factors should be assessed within the Bayesian probabilistic framework of Swinburne's argument." (this issue p. 00.) The quick answer is that given the arguments to the existence of a God with the traditional properties including perfect goodness, moral considerations entail that he will (very probably) intervene in, and become incarnate in our world. I argue that in *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*. The other major theistic religions either deny that he has done this, or (Hinduism) present historical evidence for incarnation in humans in a remote past of a kind which – however anyone estimates the historical evidence about the life, teaching, and Resurrection of Jesus – is obviously incomparably weaker than that connected with Jesus. The metaphysical systems of the non-theistic religions are less sim-

ple than theism, and neither their religious experiences nor theistic ones should be given too much weight in an overall cumulative case. (See my *Faith and Reason*, second edition, Clarendon Press, forthcoming 2005, chap. 7.) There is, therefore, very good prima facie reason to suppose that those religions cannot be nearly as well supported by evidence as is Christianity, and so good prima facie reason for other investigators not to give them such detailed attention. But of course if my arguments for the existence of God or for Christian doctrines turned out to be weaker than I claim, or it turned out that what I have neglected is a lot more relevant than I suppose, I would need to investigate the other religions more thoroughly. But we live finite lives, and so have time only to investigate the relevance of the evidence which prima facie is most relevant. If I had a much longer life, I would certainly investigate the other religions in more detail.

31. This is the method of "reflective equilibrium" as characterized by Rawls. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 20.

32. This issue p. 520

33. Some of the points made in this paper are made in a very elegant way in a paper of Timothy McGrew, "Has Plantinga refuted the historical argument?", *Philosophia Christi*, 6 (2004).