

Critique of Supernatural Revelation

STEVEN NEMES 

North Phoenix Preparatory Academy
E-mail: snemes2@gmail.com

Abstract

This article argues that the claim of traditional Christian theology and religion to be in possession of supernatural revelation cannot be substantiated in a valid and non-circular manner in principle. It then notes the consequences for theology if the notion of supernatural revelation is abandoned. It proposes agnosticism about unknowable matters as a way of exercising faith or trust in the limits God’s providence has established for human knowledge.

Keywords: agnosticism, supernatural revelation, onto-epistemology, broad and ugly ditch, theological epistemology, Thomas Aquinas

PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT FOUNDATIONAL claim of traditional Christian religion and theology is that it is in possession of supernatural revelation. The essay intends to present an argument by which to call into question the very possibility of substantiating such a claim. It also responds to common arguments in defense of the notion that the occurrence of supernatural revelation would be expected. It concludes by considering the consequences of abandoning the idea of supernatural revelation for theological belief. It proposes principled agnosticism as a distinct way of exercising faith in the providence of God which has established certain limits on the natural possibilities of human knowing.

“Supernatural Revelation” Defined

It is important to begin by defining terms. “Revelation” means uncovering or unveiling (*apokalypsis, revelatio*). In mundane circumstances, a thing that is “revealed” has become uncovered or unveiled and thus newly visible or accessible for someone, as when a curtain is withdrawn or a chest is opened. In these cases, a person is made capable of seeing something by means of

his or her natural powers because the obstacles preventing one from seeing it have been set aside.

The situation is somewhat different when it is a matter of “supernatural” revelation of the sort that Christian theology claims to possess. On the one hand, it is a matter of supernatural knowledge in the sense that it is knowledge gained in a manner that exceeds the powers of knowing and cognitive endowments that belong to human beings by nature. On the other hand, it is supernatural in the sense that it is knowledge of things that are not themselves knowable to human beings such as these are by nature.¹ In the case of supernatural revelation, nature is exceeded both in the mode of knowing (epistemologically) and in the being of the object known (ontologically). One could therefore say that the “supernatural” that is involved in the case of Christian theology is an *onto-epistemological* notion. This point can be explained as follows.

Human beings are by nature capable of knowing things in various ways. One natural “organ” of knowledge is the body’s sensory apparatus: sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing. The knowledge gained by means of the senses—for example, that the sky is blue or that it is raining outside—is thus natural, and things that can be known by means of the senses can themselves be called natural. A further natural “organ” of knowledge would include reason, whether this is understood merely as acting upon the information previously gained by means of the senses or else as capable of its own form of intuition or perception.² The knowledge gained by means of reason—for example, that a person who has just eaten is no longer hungry, or that *modus ponens* is a valid argument form—is thus also natural, and things that can be known on the basis of reason can themselves be called natural. Memory could perhaps constitute a further natural “organ” of knowledge. The knowledge gained by means of memory—for example, that one has eaten breakfast this morning—would thus also be natural, and things that can be known on the basis of memory could themselves be called natural. Some persons might also suggest that moral intuition could

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.1.1 writes that the “philosophical disciplines” (*philosophicas disciplinas*) are concerned with those things which fall within the grasp of reason (*ea quae rationi subduntur*) and are discovered by natural human reason (*quae sunt secundum rationem inventae*). On the other hand, sacred doctrine is said to concern “those things that are beyond reason” (*ea quae supra rationem sunt*). Its object is a teaching founded on divine revelation (*doctrinam quandam secundum revelationem divinam*). See also the discussion in the prologue of *Scriptum Super Sententiis* 1.

² The difference between empiricist and rationalist philosophies might helpfully be understood as a difference as to whether or not one conceives of reason as an organ of perception or intuition. An empiricist would think that reason acts upon the information gained by means of the senses but cannot itself secure new information apart from them. A rationalist would think that reason is itself a kind of organ of perception whose proper objects are the truths of reason rather than mere sensible objects. Or one might also say that knowledge involves a single organ of which the senses and reason are distinct dimensions or aspects.

constitute a further natural “organ” of knowledge. The knowledge gained by means of moral intuition—for example, that murder is wrong, or that helping others is good—would thus also be natural, and things that can be known on the basis of moral intuition would themselves be called natural. (One might be skeptical that memory and moral intuition count as genuine “organs” of knowledge, but I include them here for the sake of being comprehensive.) And one could also mention here the human capacity for transcendental or phenomenological reflection on experience itself as yet another natural “organ” of knowledge. The knowledge gained by means of phenomenological reflection—for example, that at most three sides of a cubic object can ever be seen at one time, or that every object is perceived against the background of some horizon of meaning—is thus also natural, and things that can be known on the basis of phenomenological reflection can themselves be called natural.³

The “natural” is thus an onto-epistemological category. It refers to those dimensions of reality that are open and accessible to the human being such as it is by nature. The concept of “supernatural revelation” can therefore be understood by way of contrast with all these natural modes of knowing and their proper objects. On the one hand, from the point of view of the mode of knowing, supernatural revelation takes place neither by the senses, nor by reason, (nor by memory, nor by moral intuition,) nor by phenomenological reflection. On the other hand, from the point of view of the being of the known object, supernatural revelation principally concerns things that are not themselves of a kind as to be knowable by the senses, nor by reason, (nor by memory, nor by moral intuition,) nor by phenomenological reflection. All this is to say that supernatural revelation represents a *sui generis* category. It is a unique way of knowing, of which the corresponding object is a unique dimension of being. Traditional examples of supernatural knowledge include the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation.⁴

³ Transcendental or phenomenological reflection is aimed at the discovery of the “material *a priori*.” These are truths about necessary truths of experience which are founded not only or even principally in human subjectivity but also in the objective being of the objects of experience themselves. It is as much a fact about consciousness as it is a fact about cubes that at most three sides of a cube can be seen at one time. See Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 74. See also the discussion of the material *a priori* in phenomenological philosophy in Claude Romano, *At the Heart of Reason*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015).

⁴ In the case of the Trinity, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1.3: “Now, in those things which we hold about God there is truth in two ways. For certain things that are true about God wholly surpass the capability of human reason (*quae omnem facultatem humanae rationis excedunt*): for instance, that God is three and one. But there are certain things to which even natural reason can attain (*quae etiam ratio naturalis pertingere potest*), for instance, that God is, that God is one, and others like these, which even the philosophers, being guided by the light of natural reason, proved demonstratively about God.” In the case of the Incarnation, compare Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of*

What is this mode of knowing? It is neither sensory experience, nor rational argument or intuition, (nor memory, nor moral intuition,) nor transcendental or phenomenological reflection, but rather *special divine insight*. One is granted by special divine action a perception of an otherwise inaccessible and unknowable truth. The discussion will return to this point later.

Nature and Supernature Related

Nature is that sphere of reality which is knowable to human beings given the cognitive endowments which belong to them by default. Supernature is that sphere of reality which is not so knowable. That there is nature as defined above is clear from experience. Human beings have senses, reason, (memory, moral intuition,) and the power of phenomenological reflection, and each of these powers upon being exercised meets with its proper object in experience. The further question can be asked whether and how nature and supernature are related to one another.

It is clear from what was written above that supernature is defined in terms of what exceeds the limits of nature. The supernatural is that dimension of reality which is not accessible or knowable to human beings in keeping with their natural powers of knowing and cognitive endowments. This means that nature and supernature are not identical and cannot simply be identified with one another. But it may be possible to understand how they are interrelated in a different way.

On the one hand, one may say that nature and supernature are two coeval and distinct spheres of reality. To say that they are coeval is to say that neither is more fundamental than the other. To say that they are distinct is to say that either differs from and thus cannot be identified with the other. Nature and supernature would thus make up two things relating to one another like two cats or two cups on a table. This way of understanding things is undesirable for various reasons. For example, it would require that both nature and supernature are equally contained within some greater sphere of reality that is reducible to neither. But Christian theology considers nature and supernature to be exhaustive of the whole of reality. It also implies that the relationship between nature and supernature could only be purely a contingent and accidental one. But God, the creator of nature and of all things, is thought to be a resident of the supernatural sphere. This means that the relationship between nature and supernature cannot be conceived of along the lines of such a crass dualism as this.

Christ, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), p. 1: "We cannot compare the fact of Christ with other facts, nor can we deduce the fact of Christ from our knowledge of other facts. The fact of Christ comes breaking into the continuity of our human knowledge as an utterly distinctive and unique fact, which we cannot understand in terms of other facts, which we cannot reduce to what we already know. It is a new and unique fact without analogy anywhere in human experience or knowledge."

On the other hand, one may say that supernature is more fundamental and thus prior to nature. Nature would be an effect of supernature, and supernature is the proper context within which nature must be understood.⁵ This is the position presented by Dumitru Stăniloae as constituting the Eastern Orthodox position on the matter.⁶ It is also maintained by other recent writers such as David Bentley Hart.⁷ This is the view to be considered in the course of this paper.

Nature is thus understood as an effect of supernature, while supernature is the proper context within which nature subsists. But recall from earlier that supernature is also defined as that which exceeds the limits of the possibilities of nature. Two important consequences follow from this. First, the existence of a real relation between nature and supernature must itself be an effect of supernature. An effect cannot bring itself into existence as the effect of some thing, but rather its cause must bring it into existence and only thus make it to be the effect of that cause. For example, a rock cannot make a man pick it up so that it becomes the rock he threw, but rather the man picks up the rock and himself makes it to be a rock that he has thrown. In order for nature to be related to supernature, supernature itself must bring this relation about as the cause and ground of nature. Second, nothing can be given a complete description in purely natural terms. For a complete description of a thing would at the very least have to include a reference to its origin, and the origin of all things is supernature according to the conception being considered here. These are therefore two important consequences of conceiving of supernature as more fundamental than and the cause of nature.

It is worth mentioning that the nature-supernature distinction still represents a kind of onto-epistemological dualism. Nature is not to be simply identified with supernature, nor are they continuous with one another along a spectrum. There is still a difference between natural and supernatural modes of knowing, and there corresponds to this difference in modalities of knowledge a further difference between the natural and the supernatural as dimensions of reality. It is certainly not the “crass” dualism of the view that says that nature and supernature are coeval and distinct, like two cats or two cups on a table. It is rather that supernature is the ground and foundation of nature. But it is still true that the super-

⁵ The now-classic discussion of this problem is found in Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études historiques* (Lethielleux, 2010).

⁶ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1 (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, 2010), p. 1: “The Orthodox Church does not propose a separation between natural and supernatural Revelation. Natural Revelation is known and understood fully in the light of supernatural Revelation; or natural Revelation is continually given and maintained by God by means of an action of His that is greater than nature” (my translation.)

⁷ See David Bentley Hart, *You are Gods: On Nature and Supernature* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2022).

natural is defined in terms of what exceeds the limits of the possibilities of the natural. This is justification for speaking of an onto-epistemological “dualism.”

Against Supernature

From the point of view of human experience, nature is the default starting place in which each person finds him- or herself.⁸ Human life takes place within the world of experience laid bare by one’s natural powers of knowing. Supernatural revelation must also take place within the natural world if human beings are to become aware of it. Therefore, as a phenomenon, supernatural revelation involves the special “coupling” of some dimension of nature thus defined with the greater context of supernature in such a manner that something naturally unknowable becomes knowable.⁹ Traditional Christian theology and religion maintains that this has happened at various times in history, for example with the doctrines of the Trinity or Incarnation. The question to be addressed here is whether this idea can be justified.

For any x whatsoever appearing in the world of experience to which one might point, it will always be possible to provide a description of that thing in natural terms. This follows from the mere fact of its appearing in the world of experience. It will be describable in the same sorts of terms that apply to all the various objects of sense, or of reason, or of memory, or of moral intuition, or of transcendental or phenomenological reflection. All its various natural properties will be discoverable through these means. But it will always remain an open question whether x should also be described in any supernatural terms at all.¹⁰ That is because the supernatural is defined in terms of what exceeds the limits of the possibilities of the

⁸ Emmanuel Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude: An Essay on Birth and Resurrection*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), p. 16: “Human beings were not created without grace, but all the same we find ourselves first in nature (or better in finitude) — that is to say, independent of the evidence that will be the revelation of God.”

⁹ Thus Jean-Luc Marion, “The Possible and Revelation,” p. 2, in *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pp. 1–17: “Religion attains its highest figure only when it becomes established by and as a revelation, where an authority that is transcendent to experience nevertheless manifests itself experientially. Such an experience, effectively beyond (or outside of) the conditions of possibility of experience, is affirmed not only by its affidavit from privileged or designated individuals, but by words or expositions rightly accessible to everyone (e.g., the Scriptures). Revelation takes its strength of provocation from what it speaks universally, yet without this word being able to ground itself in reason within the limits of the world” (emphasis added).

¹⁰ This argument presents a version of G. E. Lessing’s “broad and ugly ditch.” See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, “On the proof of the spirit and of power,” pp. 83–88, in *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, ed. H. B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). See also the critical discussion of Lessing’s entire argument in Toshimasa Yasukata, *Lessing’s Philosophy of Religion and the German Enlightenment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), ch. 4.

natural. Any inference from some natural description of a thing to a supernatural description of it will be a *non sequitur*. For example, the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected from the dead is equally compatible with a number of supernatural descriptions: that he is the divine Son; that he is a merely human messiah, irrespective of whatever self-conception he may have had; or that he is merely a human being whom God willed to be resurrected from the dead for whatever reason whatsoever.¹¹ On the other hand, any inference from the natural description of a thing to the supernatural description of it on the basis of some proposition about the supernatural would constitute a *petitio principii*. The very question at stake is whether there is reason for believing in a supernature beyond nature in the first place. But if it is not possible to give a valid and non-circular argument in defense of one's supernatural description of some *x*, then the description in supernatural terms of any natural *x* is an unjustifiable assertion.¹²

Traditional Christian theology and religion are founded upon the description of at least some natural things in supernatural terms. For example, the texts of the Old and New Testaments are not only human texts expressing naturally acquired insights. They are also thought to be divinely inspired texts by which God himself speaks in a way that does not apply to simply every text whatsoever.¹³ Likewise, many Christians assert that the teaching hierarchy of the church as a religious institution are not simply merely human leaders. They are also specially guided by God in their thinking and reasoning and in their making definitive declarations of faith and doctrine in a way that does not apply to all other historical religious institutions.¹⁴ So also, Christians do not believe that Christian faith is the same sort of thing as any other religious faith. It is not simply a matter of believing something true without having the thing presented in experience,

¹¹ Cf. Lessing, "On the proof of the spirit," p. 86: "If I have no historical objection to the fact that this Christ himself rose from the dead, must I therefore regard it as true that this same risen Christ was the Son of God?"

¹² Compare the discussion of the "logic of the inaccessible" in Steven Nemes, *Orthodoxy and Heresy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), ch. 5; and *Theology of the Manifest: Christianity without Metaphysics* (New York: Lexington Press/Fortress Academic, 2023), chs. 1–2. See also the argument of John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* 4.19.11, in John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding: And A Treatise on the Conduct of the Understanding* (Philadelphia: Kay & Troutman, 1846), p. 455.

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1.1.1: "Scripture, inspired by God (*divinitus inspirata*), is no part of the philosophical disciplines, which were discovered by human reason (*philosophicas disciplinas, quae sunt secundum rationem humanam inventae*)."

¹⁴ This is a common idea among proponents of "high" conceptions of ecclesial authority in theology. For defenses of this idea on historical and dogmatic grounds, see the discussions in Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Church* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1983); and Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian of the Faith* (Ave Maria: Sapientia Press, 2017). For an extended critique of this idea on biblical grounds, see Steven Nemes, *Theological Authority in the Church: Reconsidering Traditionalism and Hierarchy* (Eugene: Cascade, 2023).

but of being specially illumined by God to be able to do this.¹⁵ What is more, the thing itself that is believed is of such a sort that it would not naturally occur to a human being at all.¹⁶ Christian faith is supernatural taken both in terms of what is believed (*fides quae creditur*) and as a disposition to assent to such things as are being proposed for belief (*fides qua creditur*).¹⁷ Thus, while the biblical texts, church history, and religious faith are undoubtedly natural phenomena describable in natural terms, they are also asserted by Christian theology and religion to contain a further supernatural dimension. But the argument given above has shown that the supernatural description of any natural phenomenon cannot be justified on valid and non-circular grounds. It can only be asserted without substantiation. It therefore follows that traditional Christian theology and religion are founded on unsubstantiated assertions.

Begin with the example of the Old and New Testament texts. These are obviously at least natural phenomena. They are clearly at least texts written by human beings in which various things are asserted. These things may be either true or false, although it is impossible to provide definitive proof one way or the other. But there is nothing about them simply as natural texts that entails any particular description of them in supernatural terms.¹⁸ This follows from the assertion that supernature is defined in terms of what exceeds the limits of the possibilities of nature. One could just as well

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *ST 2-2.6.1*: “Since man, by assenting to matters of faith, is raised above his nature, this must needs accrue to him from some supernatural principle moving him inwardly; and this is God” (*Quia cum homo, assentiendo his quae sunt fidei, eleuetur supra naturam suam, oportet quod hoc insit ei ex supernaturali principio interius movente, quod est Deus*).

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *ST 2-2.6.1*: “Because those things which are of faith surpass human reason, hence they do not come to man’s knowledge, unless God reveal them” (*Ea enim quae sunt fidei excedunt rationem humanam, unde non cadunt in contemplatione hominis nisi Deo revelante*).

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *ST 2-2.6.1*. For the distinction between *fides quae creditur* and *fides qua creditur*, see Gerald O’Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 167.

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.8.1 gives such reasoning: “What wonderful confirmation ensues when, with keener study, we ponder the economy of the divine wisdom, so well ordered and disposed; the completely heavenly character of its doctrine, savoring of nothing earthly; the beautiful agreement of all the parts with one another—as well as such other qualities as can gain majesty for the writings. But our hearts are more firmly grounded when we reflect that we are captivated with admiration for Scripture more by grandeur of subjects than by grace of language.” In John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), p. 82. These arguments are clearly contentious at best. On the one hand, modern scholarship has brought to light the diverse and at times even conflicting points of view being expressed in the various biblical texts. This calls into question the “beautiful agreement of all the parts with one another.” On the other hand, whether or not Scripture treats grand subjects is no proof of its divine inspiration. All the works of theologians in subsequent Christian history likewise treat of the same grand subjects and sometimes even grander ones.

imagine a nearly identical set of texts which in some places make the opposite assertions. Neither can one assert that they alone possess various marks by which their supernatural dimension is discerned. This would be to presuppose that one knows what the supernatural is like and how it would express itself. One could just as well propose some other set of purported marks of the supernatural which they lack and conclude that they are not specially or uniquely related to the sphere of supernature. In any case, the very question at stake is whether there is a supernature in the first place. Thus, it seems that every argument in defense of the description of the Old and New Testament texts in supernatural terms will be either a *non sequitur* or a *petitio principii*. It ultimately cannot be argued but only asserted without substantiation.

Or consider the teaching hierarchy of the church. It is obviously at least a natural phenomenon. It is clearly at least a religious institution that operates according to a certain intelligible pattern as it pursues its own purposes in the light of changing historical and social conditions. The things it says and teaches may or may not be true, although it is impossible to provide definitive proof one way or other. But there is nothing about it simply as a natural institution that demands any particular description of it in supernatural terms. This follows from the assertion that supernature is defined in terms of what exceeds the limits of the possibilities of nature. Neither can one assert that it alone possesses various marks by which its supernatural dimension is discerned. This would be presuppose that one knows what the supernatural is like and how it would express itself. One could just as well propose some other set of purported marks of the supernatural which it lacks and conclude that it is not specially or uniquely related to the sphere of supernature. In any case, the very question at stake is whether there is a supernature in the first place. Thus, it seems that every argument in defense of the description of the teaching hierarchy of the church in supernatural terms will be either a *non sequitur* or a *petitio principii*. It ultimately cannot be argued but only asserted without substantiation.

Or consider the example of faith. This is obviously at least a natural phenomenon. It is clearly at least a matter of believing something about a religious thing apart from the direct experience of the thing in question.¹⁹ The proposition that one believes may be either true or false, although it is impossible to provide definitive proof one way or the other. But there is nothing about faith simply as natural religious belief that entails any particular description of it in supernatural terms. This follows from the assertion that supernature is defined in terms of what exceeds the limits of

¹⁹ Compare Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 2-2.1.4: "Now those things are said to be seen which, of themselves, move the intellect or the senses to knowledge of them (*illa autem videri dicuntur quae per seipsa movent intellectum nostrum vel sensum ad sui cognitionem*). Wherefore it is evident that neither faith nor opinion can be of things seen either by the senses or by the intellect."

the possibilities of nature. Neither can one assert that Christian faith alone possesses various marks by which its supernatural dimension is discerned. This would be to presuppose that one knows what the supernatural is like and how it would express itself. One could just as well propose some other set of purported marks of the supernatural which it lacks and conclude that they are not specially or uniquely related to the sphere of supernature. In any case, the very question at stake is whether there is a supernature in the first place. Thus, it seems that every argument in defense of the description of Christian faith in supernatural terms will be either a *non sequitur* or a *petitio principii*. It ultimately cannot be argued but only asserted without substantiation.

It would be well now to summarize. Traditional Christian theology and religion is founded on the claim that it possesses supernatural revelation. This means that it is founded on the assertion that some natural things to be found in the world of experience are also specially and uniquely characterizable in supernatural terms. But it is impossible to give a valid and non-circular argument in favor of the characterization of any natural item in particular supernatural terms. For any x whatsoever that appears within the world of experience, it will always remain an open question whether it should be described in any supernatural terms at all, irrespective of the particular natural terms in which it is described. But if it is impossible to give a valid and non-circular argument in favor of the characterization of any natural item in particular supernatural terms, then such a description cannot be argued but only asserted without substantiation. This also holds in the case of the purported instances of supernatural revelation to which Christian theology and religion makes appeal. This means that these are ultimately founded on unsubstantiable assertion.

Responding to Some Initial Objections

One may object to this line of argument in various ways. It would be well to consider them here in order.

First, one may suggest that the existence of God suffices to prove the existence of the supernatural.²⁰ But this is not obvious. This objection seems

²⁰ This argument is presented by Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1.2.3. The second argument against God's existence is the following: "Further, it is superfluous to suppose that what can be accounted for by a few principles has been produced by many. But it seems that everything we see in the world can be accounted for by other principles, supposing God did not exist. For all natural things can be reduced to one principle which is nature; and all voluntary things can be reduced to one principle which is human reason, or will. Therefore there is no need to suppose God's existence." Thomas responds as follows: "Since nature works for a determinate end under the direction of a higher agent, whatever is done by nature must needs be traced back to God, as to its first cause. So also whatever is done voluntarily must also be traced back to some higher cause other than human reason or will, since these can change or fail; for all things that are changeable and capable of defect must

to presuppose a conception of the “natural” other than the one at stake in this essay.²¹ Recall how the “natural” was defined earlier: in terms of what is accessible on the basis of the powers of knowing that belong to human beings such as they are by nature. Put another way, the “natural” includes everything to be found in the spheres of sense, reason, (memory, moral intuition,) and transcendental or phenomenological reflection. “Nature” is thus an onto-epistemological notion. It does not simply mean “material” or “physical” (in the sense of modern physics) or anything of the sort. Now, if the existence of God can be known in any of the previously mentioned ways, then his existence is thereby a “natural” reality, much the same as any other thing discoverable by any of these means, and consequently does not by itself a proof of the supernatural. To prove by natural means of knowing the existence of something that exists of itself and is the source of everything else’s reality is not thereby to prove the supernatural. In that case, the objection constitutes a *non sequitur*. But if one says instead that the existence of God cannot be known in any of these ways, then this objection is tantamount to justifying the existence of the supernatural by appeal to the supernatural—a *petitio principii*. The existence of God therefore does not prove the reality of the supernatural as this term is being used in the present context.

Second, one may suggest that the description of things in supernatural terms is not justified inferentially on the basis of the natural, nor merely asserted, but rather immediately intuited on the basis of a supernatural insight.²² This is what was mentioned above. The description of things in supernatural terms is itself made possible by supernatural revelation. Supernatural revelation not only involves knowledge of a supernatural dimension of reality but also a correspondingly supernatural mode of knowing. Natural knowing means knowing by sense, or reason, (or memory, or moral intuition,) or transcendental or phenomenological reflection. Supernatural knowing therefore means specially enabled direct insight. It is on the basis of such an insight that the supernatural description of certain natural things is ultimately justified.

This objection also does not convince. It is ultimately no different than what was discussed above about faith in the earlier section. Faith is at least a natural phenomenon: religious belief in a proposition apart from the direct experience of the thing itself to which the proposition refers. But whether or not it is further characterizable in supernatural terms as a special

be traced back to an immovable and self-necessary first principle, as was shown in the body of the Article.”

²¹ Cf. the characterization of the “natural” in Graham Oppy, *The Best Argument against God* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

²² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *ST 2-2.6.1*: “Because those things which are of faith surpass human reason, hence they do not come to man’s knowledge, unless God reveal them” (*non cadunt in contemplatione hominis nisi Deo revelante*).

divine insight remains an open question. Supernature is defined as what exceeds the limits of the possibility of nature. This means that any attempted inference of some certain supernatural description of it from any of its natural characterizations is a *non sequitur*. Not every belief in a proposition apart from the direct experience of the thing itself to which the proposition refers is characterizable in special supernatural terms. But to suppose that faith has certain marks by which the self-expression of the supernatural is distinguished is to presuppose knowledge of how supernature expresses itself. Yet whether there is a supernatural at all is precisely the question at hand—a *petitio principii*. Something similar can also be said about this purported “special divine insight.” It is at the very least characterizable as a belief about something that is not directly experienced. But there is nothing about it when it is characterized in these terms that requires one to describe it in any particular supernatural terms. Indeed, when considered simply as a belief in something apart from the direct experience of it, there is no differentiating it from delusion.

Neither could one say that the special divine insight by which the supernatural is perceived is itself somehow “self-authenticating” on the basis that the experience of it is also accompanied by the further, concurrent conviction that one is undergoing special divine insight.²³ This would be confused reasoning. One’s sense of sight is self-authenticating in the sense that one cannot be mistaken about the fact that one is undergoing a visual experience. One either feels it happening to one or not. But the firm conviction that one has achieved a special insight into something does not by itself entail or demonstrate that one actually has special insight into anything at all. Being convinced that one is undergoing something is compatible with its not really happening. Indeed, every time a person comes to believe something that makes new sense of all the previously unintelligible data at his or her disposal, this believing is accompanied by the conviction or feeling that he or she is now seeing things clearly. But this is clearly compatible with the belief’s actually being false. For example, a woman may come to be firmly convinced that her husband is being secretive because he is cheating on her, when in fact he is planning a surprise for her. Even the deluded or conspiratorial person can be convinced within himself that he believes correctly or that he is seeing things as they are once a ridiculous theory is hatched in his mind. Thus, one cannot be mistaken about the fact that one seems to see, i.e. that one feels oneself to see, but one can easily be

²³ This is the language used by William Lane Craig and Kevin Diller to describe the “inner testimony of the Holy Spirit,” following Alvin Plantinga. See William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008); Kevin Diller, *Theology’s Epistemological Dilemma: How Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga Provide a Unified Response* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014); Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). See also the critique of this idea in Nemes, *Theology of the Manifest*, ch. 2.

mistaken about one's conviction that one has in fact achieved some special insight into something. To infer something of supernatural significance from the natural description of this state of being convinced that one has been granted special divine insight into some matter or other is therefore a *non sequitur*. But to propose that this special divine insight possesses certain marks which distinguishes it as an expression of the supernatural is to presuppose knowledge of supernature's way of expressing itself. And this is a *petitio principii*.

This point can further be appreciated from the following point of view. Suppose *A* says that the Old and New Testaments are characterizable in certain supernatural terms as divinely inspired. *B* questions on what basis this claim is made. No supernatural description of the texts can be inferred from its natural description, nor can one non-circularly claim that it specially or uniquely possesses the marks of supernature. *A* responds that the characterization of the Old and New Testaments in supernatural terms as divinely inspired is itself justified on the basis of a special divine insight from which *A* benefits. It is something a person can appreciate once he or she is granted this insight. *B* will then respond that whether or not *A* does benefit from special divine insight is itself a further matter that must be justified. Certainly *A* has the conviction that the Old and New Testaments possess this supernatural dimension. He also has the additional conviction that he possesses this first conviction by way of special divine insight. But convictions in themselves are simply natural phenomena. Not every person who has a conviction about something is therefore right about it—that would be a *non sequitur*. And for *A* to claim that his conviction bears certain marks which distinguishes it as being supernatural is for *A* to presuppose knowledge of the way that supernature expresses itself, which is precisely the question at hand—a *petitio principii*.

Third, one may appeal to the traditional notion of the "motives of credibility."²⁴ The claim to be in possession of supernatural revelation is shown to be credible and probable when it is accompanied by such marks as the performance of miracles, the possession of a certain moral character, and the fulfillment of prophecies.²⁵ But this line of response is subject to all the same sorts of counterarguments as the earlier ones considered thus far.

In the case of miracles, the following should be said. Every purported miracle is at the very least characterizable in natural terms as an event in the world that occurs contrary to reasonable and well-informed expectations

²⁴ Joseph Wilhelm and Thomas Bartholomew Scanell, *A Manual of Catholic Theology: The Sources of Theological Knowledge: God, Creation, and the Supernatural Order* (New York: Benzinger Bros., 1906), p. 122: "We cannot ... accept with certitude any proposition as being the word of God without Motives of Credibility—that is, marks and criteria clearly showing the proposition to be really the Word of God." See also the discussion in Lawrence Feingold, *Faith Comes from What is Heard: An Introduction to Fundamental Theology* (Steubenville: Emmaus Academic, 2016), ch. 3.

²⁵ These are familiar arguments raised by Thomas Aquinas, SCG 1.6.

pertaining to the natural tendencies and possibilities of things. But to try to infer a supernatural description of the event in question from this natural description is a *non sequitur*. One could always say instead that some highly rare but otherwise entirely natural power has been at work. This is equally possible whether the power in question belongs to the thing itself performing in the miracle (as in the case of a healer's power to heal) or the thing being miraculously affected (as in the case of someone who is healed by another). On the other hand, merely to assert that there have been "miraculous" events in the sense of events that must be described in supernatural terms in principle is a *petitio principii* in the present context. The very question at hand is whether there is supernature at all.

In the case of moral character, the following should be said. There are persons of morally impressive character who do not make any claims to possess supernatural revelation. There are also persons of equally or at least comparably impressive character who believe incompatible things. The orthodox and the heretics alike make inconsistent claims to special insight about supernatural matters and seem equally endowed with virtues.²⁶ To argue that one rather another person is specially related to the sphere of supernature on the basis of their morally impressive character is a *non sequitur*. To suppose that the supernatural would sooner pair itself to the one sort of person rather than to the other is to presuppose knowledge of the mode of self-expression of the supernatural. But the question at hand is whether there is a supernatural in the first place, so that this response amounts to a *petitio principii*.

In the case of fulfilled prophecy, the following should be said. A fulfilled prophecy is at the very least characterizable in natural terms as an event that seems to have been successfully and unexpectedly predicted by someone in the past. But to try to infer a supernatural description of the event in question from this natural description is a *non sequitur*. It is always possible to say that the prediction was a matter of luck or otherwise the effect of a purely natural insight. What is more, the sort of predicted prophecy that traditional Christian theology and religion found themselves on is questionable. The earliest Christians thought that Jesus of Nazareth was the messiah promised by God for the people of Israel. But some modern scholarship calls into question whether or not there even are messianic predictions in the Old Testament at all.²⁷ Origen carefully

²⁶ Heikki Räisänen speaks about the readiness of many Marcionites to suffer martyrdom. See Heikki Räisänen, "Marcion," p. 107, in Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen, eds., *A Companion to Second-Century Christian 'Heretics'* (Boston: Brill, 2005), pp. 100–124. There were also very many such persons who willingly submitted to death during the medieval and Reformation eras.

²⁷ See the discussion in Stanley E. Porter, "Introduction: The Messiah in the Old and New Testaments," pp. 1–9, in Stanley E. Porter, ed., *The Messiah in the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). See also G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

considered the commonly encountered Jewish criticism that Jesus did not literally fulfill various Old Testament texts purported to speak about the Messiah (*On First Principles* 4.2.1).²⁸ He maintains that Jesus's fulfillment of these texts is spiritual rather than literal and that the spiritual sense of the prediction could only be appreciated after Jesus had already come into the world (*On First Principles* 4.1.6).²⁹ But there is another way of understanding this situation. It happens to some people that they believe God to be speaking to them through texts. They read the words on the page and these stand out as saying something that is particular to them, though the human author of the text in question could not have had them in mind. They understand God to be saying something to them by means of a text which, considered in itself and in its own context, could not mean what they understand it to say. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's experience in 1939 provides a notable historical example of this.³⁰ He read the words "Come before the winter" (2 Tim. 4:21) during his daily readings and was convinced that God was calling him to return from America to Germany.³¹ This is a

²⁸ Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. John Behr, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 485: "'For the Jews, through their hardness of heart, and because they wish to appear wise in their own sight, have not believed in our Lord and Savior, supposing that those things which were prophesied of him ought to be understood according to the letter, that is, that he ought, perceptibly and visibly, to proclaim release to the captives and that he ought at first to build a city such as they think the city of God truly to be, and at the same time to cut off the chariots of Ephraim and the horse from Jerusalem, but also to eat butter and honey in order to choose the good before he should know to bring forth evil...'"

²⁹ Origen, *On First Principles*, pp. 475, 477: "[T]he divine character and the divine inspiration both of the predictions of the Prophets and the Law of Moses have been most clearly brought to light and proved from the point that Christ arrived in this world. For before those things which were foretold by them were fulfilled, although they were true and inspired by God, they nevertheless could not be shown to be true because they were not yet proved to have been fulfilled; but the arrival of Christ proclaimed what had been said to be true and divinely inspired, whereas before it would certainly have been held doubtful whether the accomplishment of those things which had been foretold would be fulfilled... The splendour of Christ's arrival, therefore, illuminating the Law of Moses with the brightness of truth, has taken away that veil which had covered the letter and disclosed, for everyone who believes in him, all the good things which were concealed, buried within."

³⁰ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940*, ed. Dirk Schulz and Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Claudia D. Bergmann et al., vol. 15, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), pp. 230–231; Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, trans. Isabel Best (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), pp. 227–228; Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Betty Ross, Frank Clarke, and William Glen-Doepel (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), pp. 655–656. See likewise the discussion in Nemes, *Theology of the Manifest*, ch. 4.

³¹ Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground*, p. 232: "'Come before the winter'—it is not a misuse of Scripture if I allow this to be said to me. If God gives me the grace for that" (emphasis added).

common religious experience to which many people attest.³² It is equally possible for something like this to have taken place in the case of Jesus and his earliest disciples. Jesus and his disciples took God to be saying something about Jesus himself as they read or thought about the words of the Old Testament texts.³³ They may even have been right about this. God really could have been speaking to them then and there. But this would not necessarily constitute a fulfillment of a prophecy. Indeed, most of the texts they cite have nothing to do with Jesus when read in context and consequently are not prophecies.³⁴ In the best case, it is a matter of God's saying something to them then and there by making use of the scriptural words in a non-contextual way. Perhaps he does this, not to give his divine endorsement to the texts in question, but because it is situationally useful for him to do so. In the worst case, it is a matter of uncareful readers imposing their own ideas onto their sacred texts. The case for fulfilled prophecies is therefore far from easily made.³⁵

Fourth, one may object that it is true of every intellectual discipline and field of inquiry that it cannot validly and non-circularly justify its foundational principles or axioms. For example, Thomas Aquinas writes that the principles of metaphysics cannot be justified by appeal to any greater or more general science, and there is no proving them to a person who does not accept at least some of them.³⁶ Traditional Christian theology is therefore not in a uniquely troubled position in comparison to the other disciplines.³⁷

³² John Goldingay, "Hearing God Speak from the First Testament," pp. 67–69, in Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders, eds., *The Voice of God in the Text of Scripture: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), pp. 59–77.

³³ Cf. Craig A. Evans, *Matthew* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 63.

³⁴ The classic example is Matt. 2:15. When Jesus's family returns to Palestine from Egypt, Matthew says that this took place in fulfillment of the prophet Hosea's words: "Out of Egypt I called my Son" (Hos. 11:1). But it is clear in context that Hosea is not speaking of the messiah at all, but of sinful Israel during the Exodus: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and offering incense to idols." There is nothing about Hosea's text in context that suggests that he is speaking of a future messiah.

³⁵ Defenders of early Christian hermeneutical practice assume that there must be something legitimate about it insofar as Jesus and the apostles did it under supernatural inspiration. But this is clearly a *petitio principii* in the present context. They may rather have simply been mistaken about this point.

³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1.1.8: "However, it is to be borne in mind, in regard to the philosophical sciences, that the inferior sciences neither prove their principles nor dispute with those who deny them, but leave this to a higher science; whereas the highest of them, viz. metaphysics, can dispute with one who denies its principles, if only the opponent will make some concession; but if he concede nothing, it can have no dispute with him, though it can answer his objections."

³⁷ So Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 109–110: "It is worth reiterating that this [circularity] applies to other disciplines as well. Moral science, for instance, is based on the key principle that we should do good and avoid evil. You cannot argue for the veracity of this principle on the

This may be true. But this response also ignores one of the more important dimensions of the present essay's argument. On the one hand, the endowment of nature is self-evident and given in every experience. It is the "starting place" of human knowledge. It therefore rightly enjoys epistemic priority. As Emmanuel Falque writes: "Human beings were not created without grace, but all the same we find ourselves *first* in nature (or better in finitude)—that is to say, independent of the evidence that will be the revelation of God."³⁸ Nor are natural things all equally susceptible to mutually inconsistent descriptions. One cannot baldly call a red thing white, since simple experience can disprove the claim. On the other hand, the supernatural is not self-evidently given. People of mutually inconsistent convictions all claim knowledge of the supernatural, and there is no clear or easy way to prove one or the other wrong. At best what is plainly given in the supposed case of supernatural revelation is some strong conviction about something that is otherwise imperceptible and unknowable. But supernature is defined in terms of what exceeds the limits of the possibilities of nature. This means that any natural description of a thing will be equally compatible with mutually inconsistent characterizations in supernatural terms. And given that the natural is *per se* capable of mutually inconsistent supernatural descriptions, there is no evident non-circular basis for preferring one set of supernatural characterizations over another. This shows that the particular characterization of things in supernatural terms that belongs to traditional Christian theology and religion is a bare assertion that cannot be substantiated.

Fifth, one may abandon the nature-supernature distinction altogether and distinguish instead between material or physical and spiritual forms of perception.³⁹ In addition to their five senses, human beings by nature possess a certain capacity (or perhaps multiple such capacities) for perceiving distinctly spiritual things, and God on occasions activates or stimulates this in such a way as to allow a person to perceive a spiritual truth or reality. But this scheme of things is not really formally different than the onto-epistemological dualism being objected to in this paper. There is still

basis of other moral principles without being guilty of a *petitio principii*. Or again, the foundational principles of physics are derived from mathematics, and you cannot offer proof of these principles as a physicist. As one author puts it: to believe in a principle is to abide by it. We should not attempt to offer rational support for espousing our central beliefs. Indeed, in a very real sense we can't—at least not without transcending the discipline or science of which they are the first principles... [Thomas] is pointing out that theology, like any other scientific discipline, operates with foundational principles it simply assumes and cannot prove within the parameters of its own discourse."

³⁸ Falque, *Metamorphosis of Finitude*, p. 16; emphasis added.

³⁹ See the essays collected in Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, eds., *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Frederick D. Aquino and Paul L. Gavrilyuk, eds., *Perceiving Things Divine: Toward a Constructive Account of Spiritual Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022)

a fundamental discontinuity between two forms of knowledge, one of which is uncontroversial and the other of which can be called into question. That means that it does not escape all the arguments that have been brought thus far.

Suppose a person comes to believe that the texts of the Old Testament are divinely inspired. One can describe this process in perfectly natural terms. That person has come to draw a theological conclusion on the basis of the evidence they think is available to them, in accordance with the interpretive possibilities that occur to them at that time and place, given their personal history and broader context. This much at the very least is happening. But whether one says that God has granted the individual a special divine insight into some supernatural matter, or else that God has then and there specially activated an otherwise dormant but normal sense or power of perception that belongs to human beings by nature, the result is the essentially same. Why should one grant this description in the first place? There is no evidence of there existing a natural power of spiritual perception apart from the particular experiences in which it is thought to be operative. But these experiences can be described adequately in ordinary terms, without any reference to such a power at all. No more may be happening than a person's coming to believe something on the basis of the evidence available to him or her, such as he or she interprets it in his or her own particular way, with some sort of feeling accompanying the whole process. It is an ordinary hermeneutical event. To infer that more is happening from the purely ordinary description of the experience is a *non sequitur*. Even if the occurrence of "spiritual perception" is always accompanied by the conviction that one is spiritually perceiving something, it would plainly be a *non sequitur* to infer that this is what is happening. One does not have a sense for discerning others' taste in music simply because one always guesses correctly and feels convinced that one has it. It may be that one's theological preconceptions and worldview are motivating one to interpret one's experience as an instance of spiritual perception, rather than the experience itself giving adequate evidence of a spiritual sense's being activated. But one could just as well interpret the experience within the framework of some other metaphysical or theological scheme.

On the other hand, there are persons who undergo similar experiences yet draw the opposite conclusions. For example, imagine a person who comes to think that the Old Testament texts are at best the works of an inferior lesser god. The true God is not found in them, at least not unambiguously. Or imagine a person who reads the New Testament texts as teaching that Christ is not consubstantial with the Father. Either he is lesser than the Father and of a different nature, though still divine in some attenuated sense, or else he is no more than a human being who is specially used by God and empowered by the Spirit. Many persons throughout

history have had what they considered to be important moments of spiritual perception in which the penny dropped, and they were made newly able to see the true interpretation of the scriptures. Such conclusions would also be supported by much modern scholarship.⁴⁰ Now, it would be just as much a *non sequitur* here as earlier to try to describe these experiences as a form of spiritual perception, rather than simply as another metaphysically ordinary hermeneutical event in the life of an individual mind. The latter sort of description seems more than adequate, irrespective of the feelings and accompanying convictions that may form part of the experience in question. But it is also a *petitio principii* to try to discount such experiences as being false, or else as coming from demons or some other such, on the basis of the knowledge one takes oneself to have of the spiritual realm and how it operates. The very question at hand is precisely how one can justify the pretense to possess a kind of special knowledge of the supernatural or spiritual realm in the first place. It will not do simply to take such knowledge for granted in one's responses to objections.

The appeal to the notion of spiritual perception therefore does not advance the dialectic any further. Whether one speaks of special divine insight into what lies beyond the grasp of nature, or else of a natural human power that is only specially activated by God in certain circumstances, the phenomenological facts of the experience in question would be the same. It is a matter of someone's coming to believe something unobvious and questionable, not immediately evident to everyone, lacking adequate intersubjective confirmation, underdetermined by the publicly accessible evidence available, and attributing that belief's arising to some kind of special divine intervention, so that its truthfulness can be taken for granted in his or her system of thought. But because all such experiences are describable in purely natural terms that appeal neither to special divine insight, nor to spiritual perception, i.e. because there is no need of the categories of the "supernatural" or the "spiritual" in giving an initial description of them, so that they can be seen simply as further instances of other ordinary sorts of experience of which the truthfulness cannot simply be taken for granted, the same formal problem of the *non sequitur* and the *petitio principii* arises. It becomes impossible to substantiate the claim that there is "something more" happening in these experiences in a valid and non-circular manner. What is uncontroversially present in such experiences (the forming of a conviction in a certain lived context, i.e. a hermeneutical event in an individual's mind) does not logically imply describing them in further "supernatural" or "spiritual" terms (hence the *non sequitur*), whereas the description of the experiences in such further terms presupposes one's prior possession of knowledge of the unique sphere of reality to which only

⁴⁰ See for example Steven Nemes, *Trinity and Incarnation: A Post-Catholic Theology* (Eugene: Cascade, 2023).

these experiences described in “supernatural” or “spiritual” terms can give access, which is the very issue at hand (hence the *petitio principii*).

The lesson learned from all this is a general one. For any x whatsoever that appears within the world of experience—whether it is an external reality like the biblical texts, or some religious body, or an historical event, or else an internal reality like one’s own convictions—the thing in question will be describable in natural terms while it always remains an open question how or even whether it should further be described in supernatural terms. And every argument given in defense of the description of a thing in supernatural terms will ultimately be either a *non sequitur* or a *petitio principii*. Hence, the claim to possess supernatural revelation cannot be justified by means of a valid and non-circular argument but only asserted without substantiation. And this means that traditional Christian theology and religion are ultimately founded on an unsubstantiable assertion.⁴¹

Responding to Arguments for Revelation

There have been some arguments given throughout history in favor of the thesis that supernatural revelation is to be expected. It would be well to consider them briefly in the following pages.

First, one could argue that supernatural revelation was necessary for salvation. This is the argument that Thomas Aquinas gives in various places.⁴² Tyron Inbody summarizes it by saying that “the concept of God derived from general revelation is soteriologically inadequate. That is, it is insufficient for our ‘knowing God’ as the source and goal of our salvation.”⁴³ But this argument does not convince. It is founded on the premise that the final end of human beings is a supernatural one. Only thus would salvation

⁴¹ One might further object that the kind of argumentation being proposed in this essay undermines belief in moral intuition. This kind of argument is raised by John Greco, “The Possibility of Spiritual Perception: Objections and Replies,” p. 5, in Aquino and Gavrilyuk, eds., *Perceiving Things Divine*, pp. 3–19. For moral experience may be ultimately describable in terms which make no reference to irreducible moral categories, e.g. a person expresses his or her subjective resonance to a purported moral principle in universal language. Nothing more is happening than a person expressing his or her very strong preferences regarding the way things are at the widest possible level. I would personally endorse this line of argument, though there would be very much more to be said and no space here to say it. I will only note here that the kind of methodological “common-senseism” that takes philosophically controverted ideas for granted seems to me out of place in these sorts of discussions. Pretended knowledge in the sphere of morality can be called into question, just as in the sphere of theology.

⁴² See Thomas Aquinas, *ST 1.1.1*. Balázs M. Mezei, Frances Aran Murphy, and Kenneth Oakes, *Illuminating Faith: An Invitation to Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 28 summarize the point as follows: “God shared his mind with us because we cannot be saved unless he does so.”

⁴³ Tyron Inbody, *The Faith of the Christian Church: An Introduction to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 65.

involve an exceeding of the limits of nature.⁴⁴ But this is itself a supernatural description of human beings. To try to infer it from any natural description of human beings is a *non sequitur*. Supernature is defined in terms of what exceeds the limits of the possibilities of nature. But merely to assert it in defense of the thesis that there has been supernatural revelation is a *petitio principii*. It is itself the sort of proposition that could only be known by way of supernatural revelation.⁴⁵ This kind of argument is therefore circular.

Second, one could argue that various dimensions of natural human life are dissatisfactory or otherwise unfortunate from the point of view of their limitations. Both Thomas and Richard Swinburne give arguments like these.⁴⁶ Human beings either cannot or do not easily come by certain forms of knowledge on the basis of their natural abilities, whether it be knowledge of morality, or knowledge of the ultimate meaning of things, or knowledge of God. Supernatural revelation is therefore to be expected as a way of resolving these problems. It would be better for human beings to know them. But this argument likewise does not convince.

It is true that there are various things of which the knowledge is not naturally possible or easily accomplished for human beings. These are at the very least things which some human beings would prefer to know. But nothing of interest *vis-à-vis* the question of supernatural revelation can be inferred from this. One could just as well argue that their natural inaccessibility to human beings entails that the knowledge of them is not necessary for a well-lived human life. The scope of a happy human life is more modest

⁴⁴ One might also wonder whether this notion is coherent. The idea is that human salvation requires supernatural revelation. "Salvation" (*salus*) can mean deliverance from an evil or else health and well-being in general. Is the idea that "salvation" is a matter of being delivered from nature's limits? That would mean that nature, i.e. creatureliness considered in itself, is an evil from which things have to be freed. This would mean that creation by itself is imposing evil upon created things. But if the idea is that the general health or well-being of the human being requires that its natural capacities be exceeded, then it would seem to be incoherent. For what other measure is there of the well-being of a thing except its nature? The idea that salvation can require supernatural revelation is therefore objectionable.

⁴⁵ Thus Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1.1.1 argues that there is need of sacred doctrine in addition to the philosophical disciplines "because the human being is ordered to God as to an end that surpasses the grasp of reason, according to that passage in Isaiah 64" (*quia homo ordinatur ad Deum sicut ad quendam finem qui comprehensionem rationis excedit, secundum illud Isaiae LXIV*)

⁴⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1.1.1: "Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors. Whereas man's whole salvation, which is in God, depends upon the knowledge of this truth. Therefore, in order that the salvation of men might be brought about more fitly and more surely, it was necessary that they should be taught divine truths by divine revelation." See also Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 79–85.

and restrained than these figures suppose, and within its proper limits the endowment of nature is sufficient.⁴⁷ If the knowledge of these things were truly necessary, then they could have been naturally (more easily) knowable to human beings. Or it could be that God intends precisely that the knowledge of them be hard won and the result of a long process. It is therefore a *non sequitur* to infer the necessity of supernatural revelation from the fact that certain forms of knowledge are not naturally possible or easy for human beings. But suppose someone responds that God is not of such a character that these alternative explanations of the situation could be correct or likely. This is once more the sort of proposition that cannot be inferred from a purely natural description of things but must itself have come to knowledge by means of supernatural revelation. To appeal to it is therefore a *petitio principii* in the present context when the question at hand is whether there is a supernature at all.

Third, one could argue that the possession of the concept of supernatural revelation is itself proof of its reality. This would be a kind of “ontological argument” for the fact of supernatural revelation.⁴⁸ It would likewise not convince. The possession of a concept is not by itself proof that one has experienced the thing of which it is a concept, as David Hume argued.⁴⁹ One may possess the notion of a golden mountain without ever having seen one. The notion of “revelation” is a perfectly natural one. It is gained in ordinary circumstances, as when a door is opened or a rock is lifted and something is made newly visible. One then undergoes an experience in which a new idea comes into one’s mind which utterly changes the meaning or significance of everything else one thinks.⁵⁰ Because the idea does not seem to be the sort of thing that would have occurred to one normally, and especially if the idea seems somehow inconsonant with ordinary modes of thinking which one takes to be natural, one then attributes its occurrence

⁴⁷ Compare the arguments of eighteenth century deists like Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as old as the Creation: Or, the Gospel as a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (London, 1730).

⁴⁸ Something like this sort of argument is given by Balázs M. Mezei, *Radical Revelation: A Philosophical Approach* (New York: T&T Clark, 2017), p. 30.

⁴⁹ David Hume, *Enquiry* 2.4–5: “Nothing, at first view, may seem more unbounded than the thought of man, which not only escapes all human power and authority, but is not even restrained within the limits of nature and reality. To form monsters, and join incongruous shapes and appearances, costs the imagination no more trouble than to conceive the most natural and familiar objects... But though our thought seems to possess this unbounded liberty, we shall find, upon a nearer examination, that it is really confined within very narrow limits, and that all this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience.” In David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 13.

⁵⁰ See the introductory discussion in Balázs M. Mezei, “Introduction: the newness of revelation,” in Balázs M. Mezei, Francesca Aran Murphy, and Kenneth Oakes, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Divine Revelation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. xxi–xxx.

in one's mind to the activity of something beyond nature. This is how the idea of supernatural revelation is formed: the simple modification of the natural concept of revelation or unveiling. But it is clear that a concept so formed need not correspond to anything one has ever experienced. This argument therefore fails.

Consequences of Rejecting Supernatural Revelation

It has been argued to this point that the claim to be in possession of supernatural revelation cannot be substantiated in a valid and non-circular manner in principle. One might think that the in principle inability to substantiate a claim could constitute reason enough to give it up—granting that it is a matter of a claim about something inaccessible to the senses, reason, (memory, moral intuition,) and transcendental or phenomenological reflection, as the supernatural is supposed to be. It would be well to conclude by noting the consequences of rejecting the idea of supernatural revelation altogether.

Traditional Christian theology is historically committed to the rule or principle of *philosophia ancilla theologiae*: philosophy is the handmaiden of theology.⁵¹ This idea has precedent in pre-Christian Jewish figures like Philo.⁵² "Theology" is defined as that science which deals with what has been supernaturally revealed by God. "Philosophy" includes all the sciences and forms of knowledge which are naturally possible for human beings given their ordinary powers of knowing and cognitive endowments. To say that philosophy is the handmaiden of theology is to say at least two things. On the one hand, theology as a science enjoys epistemic priority over philosophy. What has been revealed by God is *per se* more certain than any purported knowledge that has come by way of human achievement. This means that theology cannot rightly be corrected or contradicted by philosophy—at least when it is a matter of what is taken as having been

⁵¹ For very helpful historical discussions of this idea, see Bernard Badoux, "Philosophia 'Ancilla Theologiae,'" *Antonianum* 12, no. 4 (1937): pp. 293–326; Paul L. Gavrilyuk, "The Greek Church Fathers and Philosophy," in Oliver D. Crisp, Gavin D'Costa, Mervyn Davies, and Peter Hampson, eds., *Philosophy and Theology: Faith and Reason* (New York: T&T Clark), pp. 17–30; and Malcom de Mowbray, "Philosophy as Handmaid of Theology: Biblical Exegesis in the Service of Scholarship," *Traditio* 59 (2004); pp. 1–37. Badoux's article is written in Latin.

⁵² Philo of Alexandria, *De congressu quaerendae eruditionis gratia* 14.79, in Philo, ed. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, 10 vols., Loeb Classical Library [London, 1929–62], 4:496–97, as cited in de Mowbray, "Philosophy as Handmaid of Theology," p. 5: "But just as the school subjects contribute to the acquirement of philosophy, so does philosophy to the getting of wisdom. For philosophy is the practice or study of wisdom, and wisdom is the knowledge of things divine and human and their causes. And therefore just as the culture of the schools is the bondservant of philosophy, so must philosophy be the servant of wisdom." Cf. Badoux, "Philosophia 'Ancilla Theologiae,'" pp. 295–296.

divinely revealed in fact and not as merely human commentary or interpretation of that revelation.⁵³ On the other hand, philosophy is granted the privilege of serving the purpose of theology by way of explicating and making sense of and supporting belief in supernatural revelation.⁵⁴ What has been supernaturally revealed cannot be proven philosophically, but philosophy can at least try to explain it and offer reasons for thinking that it is worth believing.⁵⁵

It is clear from all this that the ultimate foundation of the principle of *philosophia ancilla theologiae* is the idea of supernatural revelation. The reason theology enjoys this form of priority over philosophy is that it is in possession of supernatural revelation. But this essay has argued that this claim cannot be substantiated in a valid and non-circular manner in principle. There would therefore seem to be two options remaining. On the one hand, theology could continue to assert its superiority over philosophy even though it cannot substantiate it. On the other hand, theology can consider itself on a plane with the other “philosophical disciplines.”

If theology were to continue to assert its superiority over philosophy despite being unable to substantiate its claim, it would run the risk of being arrogant and intolerant. The circularity and self-assertion that exists at the theoretical foundations of theology would translate practically into ethically objectionable attitudes. It would be arrogant because it would believe more highly of itself than it has actual reason to do. Theology cannot substantiate to itself or to others its own claim to be privileged and distinguished by its possession of supernatural revelation. The claim cannot be substantiated

⁵³ Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. E. I. Watkin (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 88: “Theology, or the science of God so far as He has been made known to us by revelation, is superior to philosophy. Philosophy is subject to it, neither in its premises nor in its method, but in its conclusions, over which theology exercises a control, thereby constituting itself a negative rule of philosophy.”

⁵⁴ A famous statement of this idea is found in Origen’s metaphor of the “spoiling of the Egyptians” in the *Letter to Gregory*. See Joseph Trigg, ed., *Origen* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 210–213. “For just as the servants of philosophers say concerning geometry, music, grammar, rhetoric and geometry [*sic*] that they are adjuncts to philosophy, we say this very thing about philosophy itself with regard to Christianity.” See also Augustine’s *On Christian Doctrine* 2.144–145, in Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. R. P. H. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995): “Any statements by those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, which happen to be true and consistent with our faith should not cause alarm, but be claimed for our own use, as it were from owners who have no right to them. Like the treasures of the ancient Egyptians...”

⁵⁵ Avihu Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards’s Philosophy of Nature: The Re-Enchantment of the World in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), p. 14: “In this traditional Christian view, the natural sciences and philosophy were assigned the role of servant: they had the privilege of being employed in the defense of revealed truths, providing support and aid in achieving soteriological understanding.” Cf. Julián Marías, *History of Philosophy*, trans. Stanley Appelbaum and Clarence C. Stowbridge (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), p. 129: “[P]hilosophy is an auxiliary, subordinate discipline, which theology makes use of for its own ends.”

by means of the senses, nor by reason, (nor by memory, nor by moral intuition,) nor by transcendental or phenomenological reflection, since none of these sources can reach the supernatural *per se*. Neither can theology give a valid and non-circular reason for characterizing its own conviction regarding the truth of what it believes as being grounded in special divine insight. All it can do is assert its own self-conception and hope that others come to agree with it. Going further, theology would likewise be intolerant because it would always take its own essential commitments for granted in its public dealings with others who disagree. Traditional Christian theology that operates according to the principle of *philosophia ancilla theologiae* does not allow itself to be contradicted by philosophy in its essential commitments.⁵⁶ That is because its axiom and starting point is its notion that it has supernatural revelation on its side. It does not have to take seriously the thought that its opponents may be correct. After all, what God says is more certain than any human thinker. But this also means that it can take for granted that those who disagree with it are wrong. It does not have anything to learn from them except for what it can assimilate into its own system. The available historical evidence suggests that when this way of thinking becomes dominant in a society, that society shows itself violently intolerant toward different ways of thinking and acting. The treatment of heretics in Western Christendom is an example.⁵⁷ “Error has no rights,” as the traditional saying goes.⁵⁸ There are even some in the present day who argue that it would be the right of Christian princes and governments in Christian states (even if not always and everywhere prudent) to punish heretics with death.⁵⁹ These all seem to be expressions of objectionable arrogance and intolerance—if one grants the conclusion of the

⁵⁶ This is not necessarily true for all possible forms of Christian theology or religion. One alternative approach to the question of faith and revelation can be found in the “*anatheism*” of Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). Another would be the “*modest fideism*” of John Bishop, *Believing by Faith: An Essay in the Epistemology and Ethics of Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Still another would be fallibilist scientific approach of Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), ch. 1.

⁵⁷ See G. R. Evans, *A Brief History of Heresy* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), p. 134: “As long as it was assumed that there was only one way to heaven, and that a narrow road, the Church’s leaders could not rest while some of the flock were straying from that road and leading others to follow them.”

⁵⁸ See the discussion of the historical development of this idea in Michael P. Hornsby-Smith, *An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 70.

⁵⁹ See Alan Fimister and Thomas Crean, *Integralism: A Manual of Political Philosophy* (Neunkirchen-Seelscheid: editiones scholasticae, 2020); Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2022). Fimister and Crean are Roman Catholics whereas Wolfe is a Protestant.

present essay's argument, namely that traditional Christian theology and religion cannot substantiate its claim to be in possession of supernatural revelation in a valid and non-circular manner.

If theology were to consider itself on a plane with the other "philosophical disciplines," then it would have to subject its own claims to the same scrutiny regarding method of argument and evidential support as other disciplines do. One particular mode of argument would seem to have to be done away with: the appeal to authority. It is generally admitted that the appeal to authority is a fallacious argument. The mere fact that someone asserts a proposition does not by itself guarantee that it is true. But the propositions of theology that deal with the domain of supernature are of such a nature that they cannot be verified by means of the senses, or reason, (or memory, or moral intuition,) or transcendental or phenomenological reflection. They can only be known if at all by means of a special divine insight. This insight does not belong to all persons equally. The tendency in the history of Christian theology has been to assign this direct insight to past heroes (such as the prophets and apostles and scriptural authors) and the institutional hierarchs in the church (such as the episcopate as a whole or even the Pope). Theological argument therefore comes to function by way of the appeal to authority.⁶⁰ A proposition is or is not acceptable, not necessarily on its own merits, but because the right authorities do or do not testify to it or against it.⁶¹ But this is an unscientific method for reasoned discourse. Whether or not a proposition is true is determined only by the thing itself to which that proposition refers. As Aristotle said, truth is a matter of thinking or speaking about things as they are.⁶² But it is clearly possible for anyone's speaking or thinking to be otherwise than things are in principle. The possibility of falsehood proves that being and human thought or speech are two distinct spheres without essential correlation to one another. That is why the appeal to authority is fallacious: because a person's mere say-so does not make things to be a certain way. And the denial of supernatural revelation means that there are no specially gifted authorities in the domain of theology. Every past figure is simply one further participant, however talented or

⁶⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1.32.1: "Whoever, then, tries to prove the trinity of persons by natural reason (*naturali ratione*), derogates from faith in two ways. First, as regards the dignity of faith itself, which consists in its being concerned with invisible things, that exceed human reason (*de rebus invisibilibus, quae rationem humanam excedunt*); wherefore the Apostle says that faith is of things that appear not... Therefore, *we must not attempt to prove what is of faith, except by authority alone (quae igitur fidei sunt, non sunt tentanda probare nisi per auctoritates)*, to those who receive the authority" (emphasis added).

⁶¹ Henry Chadwick, "Ego Berengarius," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 40, no. 2 (1989): pp. 414–445, p. 427 characterizes the debates between Berengarius and Lanfranc of Bec regarding transubstantiation in these terms.

⁶² Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1011b25: "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, whereas to say of what is that it is, or what of what is not that it is not, is true." In Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2016), p. 65.

insightful, in an ongoing human conversation about theological matters. Every past figure can be taken seriously and dialogued with, but does not have to be obeyed simply *per se*.

The Future of Theological Belief

This essay will conclude by considering what follows for theological belief from all this argumentation.

Most traditional Christian theology and religion is founded on the assumption that supernatural revelation has been given which imposes on human beings the obligation to believe certain things. Giving up the idea of supernatural revelation does not necessarily mean that traditional Christian beliefs are all false. But it does mean that there is not any special obligation on anyone to believe them. At most a person can be obligated to believe them because they are true. But this is something that could apply in the case of any kind of belief about any subject matter whatsoever. There is presumably always or at least almost always an obligation to believe what is true. If the beliefs of traditional Christian theology and religion are to be commended to others, it must be on the basis of the evidential support in their favor.

If the possibility of special divine insight has been called into question, there would seem to be very little chance of giving a strong or convincing arguments in favor of traditional Christian beliefs regarding the supernatural. These are beliefs about things that cannot be supported by means of the senses, or reason, (or memory, or moral intuition,) or transcendental or phenomenological reflection in principle. It would therefore seem that these are in the most favorable case opinions that a person is free to hold or not to hold as he or she sees fit. They are matters of speculation for which any person may or may not have the disposition or taste. But these beliefs nevertheless speak about questions that are important to very many human beings. They concern matters of ethics, of human history, of the meaning of things, and of God. The situation therefore presents something of an existential quandary. There are things which are dear to the human heart and which make a difference in the way one understands one's life and one's place in the whole of being. And yet there is no way to know them since by definition they concern things that are beyond the possibility of human knowing.

The following proposal may be made. One might suggest *agnosticism* as a new way of exercising faith in the face of the natural limits of human knowledge. There are very many things which are beyond the natural powers of knowing and cognitive endowments that God has given human beings. Neither does there seem to be any way to substantiate the claim that he has supernaturally revealed them. One can therefore propose that

it is a matter of faith in God and of trust in his providence *not* to strive to know such things but rather to leave them in his hands. The human person can instead focus his or her attention on things which are nearer and more easily determined precisely because they lie within the reach of nature.

This suggestion should be understood correctly. The idea is not that it is a matter of faith to be agnostic about God's existence. It is taken for granted here that it is possible to come to a reasonable belief (if not more than that) in God's existence on the basis of the natural cognitive endowment of human beings. It is rather that it is a matter of faith in God's goodness and providence to remain agnostic and accept ignorance about things that are naturally unknowable for human beings. This counts as "faith" because it is a matter of trusting God not to have left human beings in a truly problematic and difficult situation. What can be trusted can be taken for granted. A trusty tool need not be fretted over. Even to inquire into the trustworthiness of one's car or one's spouse is to that extent to be lacking in trust. To trust in God is therefore not to wonder whether he is trustworthy and to that extent not to seek for signs of his trustworthiness or goodness beyond the realm of what is naturally knowable for human beings. It is to take his goodness as a premise rather than as a conclusion, and to understand everything on that basis as ultimately being for the good, irrespective of whether or not one can know this or prove it.

This proposal can therefore be made regarding the future of theological belief after the rejection of supernatural revelation. It is a kind of *non-theological faith* or *non-dogmatic faith*. It is a way of exercising faith in God apart from a complex theological system of beliefs. It is a distinct way of responding to the perceived limits of the human being's natural power of knowing. Rather than go looking for supernatural revelation that complements nature's lack, it can be argued to be a matter of faith in God to admit ignorance and be agnostic about matters that are beyond the natural limits of human knowledge, especially about matters that have been of historical interest to theologians. One does not feel anxious about them or curious but simply accepts the limits that God has placed upon human nature and lives within them as one thinks best. This is all that nature allows one to do, and perhaps this is also all that God in his providence wants human beings to do.⁶³

⁶³ A reviewer objected that this conception of faith is incompatible with the definition of faith in Heb. 11:1. At first glance, this objection is a *petitio principii*. This article has argued that there is no basis for asserting the special status as revelation of the biblical texts. In that case, there is no reason why Hebrews in particular should be privileged as providing a definition of religious faith. This same reviewer also objected that this notion of faith is practically problematic. A Christianity which rejected the possibility of the direct experience of God would demotivate anyone from believing in it. But this objection is confused. This article does not deny the possibility of a natural knowledge of God, but only calls into question the notion of a supernatural knowledge of him. Whatever can be naturally known about God is worth knowing and cherishing. But God has also imposed certain limits upon

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what human beings can know. It is therefore a matter of trust in his providence to mind these limits and not to reach after more.

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