

## **Two Sources of the Knowledge of God**

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Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, wrote, "Philosophy begins with a sense of wonder," and concluded that we cannot be satisfied until we have attained knowledge of the highest things. The mathematician Blaise Pascal claimed: "there is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every human being," and the French existentialist Albert Camus wrote, "There is only one really serious philosophical problem, that of suicide. To judge that life is or is not worth the trouble of being lived, this is to reply to the fundamental question of philosophy."<sup>1</sup> Although Aristotle, Pascal and Camus represent very different points of view, their remarks point to the same basic human characteristic: we seek more than food, drink, and warmth to make us happy. Instead, we want answers to questions about the meaning of life. When we ask "Who am I?", "What is my purpose?", "Is there a God?", and "If so, what is God like?" or "What does God have to do with me or my purpose?" we tip our hand: each of us is on a quest to make sense out of the fragmentary pieces of our existence.<sup>2</sup> However, in today's world, with so many voices offering conflicting answers to these questions, we are in constant danger of slipping into a deep pessimism about the very possibility of reaching real truth.

When we go about the task of making sense out of life, we always rely on a set of beliefs that we already hold. These beliefs act as a grid or filter: they help us figure out which experiences are more meaningful, important, or relevant than others. These basic beliefs, even if we are not consciously aware of them, are among the most important things about us. They determine which questions we will ask, and which answers to these questions we will consider. In this essay, I will present a two-part method for use in evaluating and revising one's own basic beliefs, and I will apply that method to the evaluation of one particular belief system -- that of historic Christianity. I will argue that, when we make use of all the available sources of information, it is reasonable to conclude that Christianity is uniquely true.

### **Knowledge through Inference to the Best Explanation**

If we are to escape intellectual despair, we must find some source of knowledge that is widely shared and on which we can base our judgments. One time-honored and widely cited source is called "inductive inference". An inference is a step or process of reasoning. In deductive inference, we make explicit what is already contained implicitly in our current stock of information. For example, if I know that all lawyers are overpaid, and that Paul is a lawyer, I can infer deductively that Paul must be overpaid. In contrast, inductive inference involves taking a step beyond what is contained in the data at hand. By inductive inference the mind is able to discern patterns in experience and use those patterns to form reasonable conjectures about unseen or not-yet-seen parts of the world.

Inductive inference often consists in discovering the underlying causes beneath the observed effects, e.g., gravity as the cause of falling apples and orbiting planets, germs as the cause of disease, money creation as the cause of inflation, etc.<sup>3</sup> This process is sometimes called the "inference to the best explanation." We conclude that a certain structure or entity really exists

when the hypothesis that it does exist provides the best possible explanation for what we observe. For example, forensic scientists examine the evidence at the scene of a possible crime and then try to reconstruct the most plausible scenario -- including the time and manner of the crime, and characteristics of the assailant -- that can best account for all of the evidence. We humans have a natural disposition to push this process further and further, seeking the most fundamental and universal of all causes. Physicists, for example, conjecture that the entire observable universe is the effect of a catastrophic Big Bang event 18-20 billion years ago.<sup>4</sup>

As the process of discovery is pushed to its extreme limit, we find ourselves searching for the uncaused "First Cause" of all observed phenomena, the ultimate source of reality. From the time of the ancient Greeks until today<sup>5</sup>, and in many different cultures (Greek, Roman, Hebrew, Islamic, Christian and Hindu), scientists, philosophers and many others have found good reason to infer the existence of a necessary, eternal Being from which everything that is fleeting and tangible derives its existence.

We can try to infer additional characteristics of the First Cause by examining its effect, namely, the observable universe. For example, scientists have uncovered more and more evidence in recent years that the fundamental constants of physics and the basic features of the universe have been "fine-tuned" to make life possible. This apparent fine-tuning of these physical quantities gives support to the supposition that the First Cause is intelligent and purposeful, and that we ourselves (as intelligent, social creatures) are the intentional creation of this cosmic designer<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, recent work on information theory and the origin of life lends further support to the belief that such an intelligent designer was involved at some point or other in the history of our planet<sup>7</sup>.

This idea is reinforced by the testimony of religious experience throughout the various human societies, nearly all of which report an awareness of a Being, which is the ultimate foundation of our existence, and which demands worship, devotion, and ethical perfection<sup>8</sup>. In addition, philosophers from Plato to John Locke to C. S. Lewis have seen the unconditional and absolute nature of the moral law as evidence of a supreme judge or lawgiver<sup>9</sup>. To sum up: many leading scientists and philosophers are finding it increasingly difficult to escape the conclusion that there is an uncaused First Cause, a being that is eternal and necessary, and one that intelligently pursues purposes involving our own existence here on earth<sup>10</sup>. Such a being has (in the Western tradition) been named "God".

However, there are two important limitations or qualifications to this use of inductive inference to establish the existence and nature of God. First, not everyone finds these inferences compelling. Many people draw contrary conclusions from the same evidence, and there is no universally agreed-upon method for settling this dispute. It appears that, at least in the real world, in which people bear so many biases and prejudices, the inductive method is not perfectly reliable. We need, therefore, an independent source of information about the existence and character of the ultimate reality, one that could corroborate or correct our tentative conclusions based on inductive inference alone.

Second, the inductive method leaves a number of vitally important questions unanswered. For

instance, even if we conclude that God does exist, we would still want to know the answers to questions such as: "What does God expect of us? What does God think of us? Does God wish to enter into a more personal relationship with each of us, and if so, how? What, if anything, does God intend to do about our fate after death?" It would be nearly impossible for us to base any specific answer to these personal or existential questions merely upon general features of the universe around us.

### **Divine Revelation in History: a complementary source**

In order for us to gain adequate answers to these existential questions about the "supernatural" realm, God must break into the natural realm and reveal the answers to us, using meaningful historical events and inspired messages. This is called "special" or "historical" revelation, in contrast to the so-called "general revelation" of God in nature and in the structure of human consciousness. If such special revelation exists, then it promises to be a useful complement to unaided inductive inference for the construction of a belief system.

Many religions claim to possess divine revelation which best answers questions like "Who am I?" and "What is my purpose?" Although there are some common elements present in all of the major religions that claim to be based in divine revelation (for instance, the ethical teachings of all tend to uphold the value of love, justice and compassion), there remain many points of irreconcilable difference. For example, in the Christian tradition, Jesus claims to be (and is acknowledged by his followers to be) the unique God-Man, the divine creator in the form of a human being. This claim is flatly contradicted by many prophets of other religions, some of whom insist that no human being can be worthy of worship, and others of whom claim that we are all equally divine. The claim that Jesus is uniquely God-in-human-form is without exact parallel in other world religions. The fact that such a claim was made about and presumably by Jesus sets him apart from every other respected prophet, teacher, and guru in history.

### **Revelation's problem is credibility**

If the problems with inductive inference are reliability and existential adequacy, the problem with revelation is that of credibility. The fact of the matter is that biblical manuscripts are not the only documents which purport to disclose the mind of God. How are we to tell whether or not the Bible and the Jesus portrayed therein is the revelation of God?

We are not left entirely adrift. The competing sources of divine revelation championed by major religions, including the Bible or the Koran or the Book of Mormon, have included claims regarding 1) the supernatural foresight of its sacred writers (prophecy), 2) the extraordinary life, words and deeds of its founder (wonders), and 3) the transforming influence of the religion on the lives of real people (impact).

These three criteria, then, determine what shape an investigation into the credibility of Christianity must take. In such an inquiry, we would have to account for the following features. First, the biblical documents offer numerous specific prophecies concerning Jesus' life which predate his birth by over a century<sup>11</sup>. Second, the disappearance of Jesus' body three days after

his crucifixion was publicly hailed as a case of resurrection (i.e., of rising from the dead) and apparently attested to by five hundred eyewitnesses<sup>12</sup>. Third, the lives of Jesus' followers appear to have been dramatically changed; those who had fled his crucifixion became martyrs for his cause.

If Christianity emerges as a clear winner over other rival claimants, then we are on solid ground in believing that its sacred texts offer an objective reference point which circumvents the threat of intellectual despair and points toward the possibility of truly knowing God.

### **Conclusion**

We have seen that constructing a system of beliefs is a task which would profit from using both inductive inference and historical revelation as means of knowing God. These two methods are not mutually exclusive but complementary. We owe it to ourselves to use the best means available for gaining knowledge about God, ourselves, and our place in the universe. However, as we use these methods we must face two facts. First, inductive inference is inherently limited as a means for discovering answers to all of our existential questions. Second, because there is more than one religious tradition which claims to embody the divine revelation, some means of discernment between them must be implemented. It seems reasonable that a revelation worthy of contributing to our understanding of God must first demonstrate its credibility through fulfilled prophecy, credible miracles, widespread impact, and the unique identity and authority of its originator.

A full defense for the rationality of the Christian revelation cannot be undertaken in this brief essay, but other papers explore this topic more fully. Among these are "Contemporary Scholarship and the Historical evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ" by Dr. William Lane Craig (Universite Catholique de Louvain) which can be obtained at the Meekness and Truth web site: [www.meeknessandtruth.org](http://www.meeknessandtruth.org).

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1 Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book Alpha, 982b10--983a10. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*. Albert Camus, *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, as cited in Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1985) IX: 392.

2 William P Alston, "Problems of Philosophy of Religion," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, reprint ed. (New York; Macmillan, 1967; 1972) 6: 286

3 Paul Humphreys, *The Chances of Explanation* (Princeton, 1989); Philip Kitcher, "Explanatory Unification and the Causal Structure of the World," in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, XIII, ed. by P. Kitcher & W. Salmon (Univ. of Minnesota, 1990), pp. 410-506.

4 Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers* (Warner Books, 1978); Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (Bantam, 1988). For a debate on the religious implications of the Big Bang, see William Lane Craig and Quentin Smith, *Theism, Atheism, and the Big Bang* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993).

5 For supporters of this argument, see: Mortimer Adler, *How to Think about God* (Macmillan, 1980); William Lane Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (Barnes & Noble, 1979); Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics* (Prentice Hall, 1963), Chapter 7; Robert C. Koons, "A New Look at the Cosmological Argument," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34, April 1997, pp. 193-211. For objections, see: William Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument* (Princeton, 1975); J. L.

Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1982), Chapter 5.

6 This is the so-called "Anthropic Cosmological Principle". In some cases the tuning is so fine that a variation from the actual values as small as 1 part out of 10 to the 300th power spoils the capacity of the universe to house complex organic molecules. Paul Davies, *The Mind of God* (Simon & Schuster, 1992); Hugh Ross, *The Fingerprint of God* (Promise Publishing, 1991); M. A. Corey, *God and the New Cosmology* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1993); John D. Barrow and Frank J. Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (Oxford University, 1986). For a balanced treatment of the implications of the anthropic coincidences, see John Leslie, *Universes* (Routledge, London, 1989).

7 Charles Thaxton, Walter Bradley, and Roger Olsen, *The Mystery of Life's Origin* (Lewis & Stanley, 1984); Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box* (Free Press, 1996); Hubert P. Yockey, *Information Theory and Molecular Biology* (Cambridge University Press, 1992). For the other side, see Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (W.W. Norton & Co., 1987), and Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (Simon & Schuster, 1995).

8 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford University, 1958); Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*; R. C. Zaehner, *Concordant Discord* (Clarendon Press, 1970).

9 Plato, *The Laws*, Book Ten, 903-908; John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Chapter 28; C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Part I. See also, Robert M. Adams, *The Virtue of Faith* (Oxford University Press, 1987), Ch. 10, and Paul Chamberlain, *Can We be Good without God?* (Intervarsity Press, 1996). For an opposing viewpoint, see J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin, 1977).

10 See Jastrow, Adler, and Davies, *op cit*.

11 Depending upon one's criteria for identifying prophetic statements, the count of messianic prophecies ranges from as many as 300 to as few as 60. Even the lower limit puts the probability of the chance fulfillment of all of the prophecies into the realm of the vanishingly small. The possibility that predictions might have been fabricated post factum, based upon Jesus' actual life situation, appears entirely excluded on the grounds that all prophetic statements were contained in the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, which by Jesus' birth had already been extant for over 100 years. Cf. F. L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of The Christian Church*, second ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1974), s.v. "Septuagint." 12I Corinthians 15:3-8.

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