

THE DISHONESTY OBJECTION:  
IS CHRISTIAN FAITH LESS INTELLECTUALLY HONEST THAN SCIENCE?

by

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### Abstract

In light of modern science, Christianity is accused of being intellectually dishonest. Unlike science, the skeptic claims, the Christian faith is closed to outside correction, embracing self-defence over self-criticism, employing non-falsifiable claims, and claiming final certainty beyond what any evidence could justify. This thesis answers the skeptic who makes this *dishonesty objection from science* by comparing science and Christianity. Science self-critically attends to nature, and theology self-critically attends to revelation. Neither can proceed if it becomes skeptical about its own ‘object’ of knowledge. The *dishonesty objection* tolerates from science what it considers dishonest from Christianity because it excludes in advance the possibility of revealed, authoritative, and transformative theological knowledge as Christian thinkers understand it. This objection thereby insists on guaranteeing theological knowledge to ourselves, by ourselves—*on our own terms*; this demand is a “pretension ... against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor. 10:5, NIV).

*For Brian Gaida*

*Teacher, Youth Pastor, Friend*

(1964 - 2014)

**“Leadership is a combination of strategy and character;  
if you have to be without one, be without strategy.”<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Brian David Gaida, paraphrasing General Norman Schwarzkopf, “Brian Gaida’s Last Youth Sermon & Gaida Tribute Video,” June 20, 2003, video, 1:24:08, <https://youtu.be/ksc6yp50pEk?t=3732>.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### 1.1 Research Problem

##### 1.1.1 Challenges to Christianity from Science

One of the most salient objections to Christianity in Western culture is that modern science has rendered it obsolete and unacceptable.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga's work, this objection may be articulated as a twofold challenge. *De facto* objections question "the *truth* of Christian belief"—the fact of the matter. *De jure* objections are

arguments or claims to the effect that Christian belief, whether or not true, is at any rate unjustifiable, or rationally unjustified, or irrational, or not intellectually respectable, or contrary to sound morality, or without sufficient evidence, or in some either way rationally unacceptable, not up to snuff from an intellectual point of view.<sup>2</sup>

First, there is the familiar *de facto* (matter of fact) challenge: repeatedly, scientific progress has overturned traditional ideas about the natural world—many of which, legitimately or not, have been publicly associated with the Bible and Christian tradition.<sup>3</sup> Since Christianity has been (ostensibly) exposed as erroneous concerning nature, it must also be untrustworthy on

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (2006; repr., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008). Note: Unless otherwise noted, this thesis uses the term *science* in the modern sense: the study of the natural world through empirical inquiry. This is further detailed in § 3.2.

This thesis is adapted from several of my (Mark McEwan's) papers, including the following: "Created Conflationism: Evangelical Antievolutionism" (essay, HIS 541, ACTS Seminaries, 2011); "Converging Lines of Witness: Genesis and the Question of Origins" (essay, BIE 614, ACTS Seminaries, 2012); "Theology of Scholarship" (essay, MTS 803, ACTS Seminaries, 2013); "Science and Theology: Competing Epistemologies?" (essay, THS 672, ACTS Seminaries, 2015); "Clement of Alexandria and the Knowledge of God" (essay, THS 673, ACTS Seminaries, 2015); "Christianity and the Postmodern Pragmatism of Richard Rorty" (essay, CAP 602, ACTS Seminaries, 2015); and "Is Christian Faith Less Honest than Science?" (thesis proposal, ACTS Seminaries, 2019).

I have also delivered several public talks while developing this subject matter, including the following: "Integrity, Hope, Lordship, and Legacy in Pastoral Apologetics" (lecture given for the MinistryLift Conference at ACTS Seminaries, Langley, BC, October 5, 2013); "Christian Apologetics and Science: Is Faith Intellectually Dishonest?" (lecture given at the 75th annual meeting of the American Scientific Affiliation, Azusa Pacific University, Los Angeles, CA, July 22-25, 2016); "Is Christianity Less Honest than Science?" (lecture given at Wolfville Baptist Church, Wolfville, NS, June 18, 2018); "Asymmetrical Partnership: Models of Science and Religion Revisited" (lecture given at ASA 2018, Gordon College, Wenham, MA, July 27-30, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University, 2000), viii–xiii.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., geocentrism, a very young earth, and the individual, *de novo* creation of all species of life on earth.

less tangible matters, such as the nature or existence of God. For those who accept this reasoning, science answers the *de facto* question: Christianity must be false.<sup>4</sup>

The second *de jure* (in-principle) challenge from science is subtler: science provides a better way of knowing *in principle*—superior for accessing and assessing *any* knowledge. The famous atheist Richard Dawkins expresses as much: “if there are any questions that science cannot answer,” he wonders, “what makes anyone think that religion can answer them?”<sup>5</sup> Here, the challenge is not that science has disproven Christianity (*de facto*), but that religious faith offers a woefully inferior means of arriving at truth in the first place (*de jure*).

Christian apologists have addressed both polarities of the objection from science. On the *de facto* front, there are diverse positions concerning whether nature, Scripture, or both have been understood correctly: while some push back against various findings of modern science,<sup>6</sup> others seek to harmonize them with Christianity.<sup>7</sup> Apologists who take up the *de jure* challenge will often criticize *scientism* (the philosophical view that science is the only, or best, path to knowledge) and defend the legitimacy of theological knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I disagree with this conclusion, of course, but this matter is not the focus of this thesis and will not detain us here. For a helpful explanation for why this is not a legitimate conclusion to draw from science, see Denis O. Lamoureux, *I Love Jesus and I Accept Evolution* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 80. Dawkins writes about religion in general here, but I will explore this matter as it pertains to the Christian faith in particular. For space and simplicity, the reader may take *theology* and *religion* to refer to their *Christian* forms (unless otherwise noted). Where a skeptical voice has criticized religion in general, this thesis responds to that criticism with the Christian religion in mind. Whereas *theology* is generally understood to be the study of God, this project uses the term to indicate *Christian* theology. Specifically, theology is the knowing project that takes God’s self-disclosure as its primary object. Theology and *Christian faith* are often mentioned in place of Christianity in general because the substance of the dishonesty objection is directed at the intellectual and faith-oriented facets of Christianity in particular.

<sup>6</sup> “About,” Answers in Genesis, accessed June 4, 2020, <https://answersingenesis.org/about/>; “Our Mission and Beliefs,” Reasons to Believe, accessed June 4, 2020, <https://reasons.org/about>.

<sup>7</sup> “About Us,” BioLogos, accessed June 4, 2020, <https://biologos.org/about-us>.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 346–50; J. P. Moreland, *Love God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1997), chap. 7.

### 1.1.2 *The Dishonesty Objection*

One aspect of the *de jure* challenge warrants further examination. Dawkins's criticism of religious fundamentalists introduces it well:

[They] know they are right because they have read the truth in a holy book and they know, in advance, that nothing will budge them from their belief. The truth of the holy book is an axiom, not the end product of a process of reasoning. The book is true, and if the evidence seems to contradict it, it is the evidence that must be thrown out, not the book. ... When a science book is wrong, somebody eventually discovers the mistake and it is corrected in subsequent books. That conspicuously doesn't happen with holy books.<sup>9</sup>

The force of Dawkins's criticism is that there is something dishonest about how Christians handle evidence in relation to their beliefs.<sup>10</sup> When beliefs drawn from Scripture are at stake, examples abound of Christians willing to dismiss or deny seemingly contradictory evidence. So writes creation scientist Henry Morris: "There is no scientific evidence whatever for evolution. The actual evidence is exactly what would be expected if God had created each kind of creature in the beginning."<sup>11</sup> Unlike science, which is ready to follow the evidence where it leads, the Christian faith appears to have its conclusions fixed in advance.

Several options are available for those seeking a summary dismissal of Dawkins's critique. One might criticize his scientism or his uncharitable portrayal of Christians and their "holy book." One could push back on historical and philosophical grounds: science is not, in

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<sup>9</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 319. Although Dawkins explicitly speaks of fundamentalists here, this complaint applies to Christian orthodoxy in general (especially for how I develop it going forward).

<sup>10</sup> I am a Christian. For the sake of brevity and consistency, however, I use the first-person plural in the same way I do when delivering an academic talk: unless it is otherwise clear from context, "we," "our," etc. refer to "we the ones who are considering this problem"—which might include skeptics and Christians alike. Accordingly, I often refer to Christians in the third person in this paper.

<sup>11</sup> Henry M. Morris, *The Long War against God: The History and Impact of the Creation/Evolution Conflict* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2008), 279. I do not intend to accuse every non-evolutionary creationist Christian of intellectual dishonesty; Christians can honestly disagree about how best to interpret the combined evidence from Scripture and nature. See, e.g., Todd Charles Wood and Darrel R. Falk, *The Fool and the Heretic: How Two Scientists Moved Beyond the Labels to a Christian Dialogue About Creation and Evolution* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019); Kenneth Keathley et al., eds., *Old-Earth or Evolutionary Creation? Discussing Origins With Reasons to Believe and BioLogos* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2017). However, to deny that the evidence even exists in the first place is another matter entirely.

fact, an inevitably progressing monolith, but “a human cultural activity,”<sup>12</sup> subject to false starts, mistakes, and pride; therefore, it is unfair to hold religion alone accountable for general, human failings that are also present in science. One might add that even though some Christians can be dishonest about science, others would agree with B. B. Warfield, “the ablest modern defender of the theologically conservative doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible,”<sup>13</sup> who said, “We may be sure that the old faith will be able not merely to live with, but to assimilate to itself all facts”—including evolution, should it turn out to be true.<sup>14</sup> “All truth is God’s truth.”<sup>15</sup>

One *Scientific American* reviewer writes that “Dawkins is frequently dismissed as a bully, but he is only putting theological doctrines to the same kind of scrutiny that any scientific theory must withstand.”<sup>16</sup> Whether or not this is entirely fair, Dawkins’s charge raises a troubling, more subtle suggestion: not merely that Christianity is dishonest *about* science, but that *compared with* science, Christianity is shown to be intellectually dishonest *itself*.<sup>17</sup>

Put another way, there are two challenges implied: (a) the superficial challenge that Christians have, at times, been slow to listen and quick to dismiss scientific evidence that contradicts their readings of Scripture; and (b) the related, more profound challenge that Christians have their conclusion—their devoted Christian faith—in advance, such that no amount of contradictory evidence could ever disprove it. This second challenge raises the objection to be addressed in this thesis: science may not be the only, or best, path to knowledge, but it is more

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<sup>12</sup> Arnold Sikkema, “Religion and the Science Classroom,” in *Foundations of Education: A Christian Vision*, ed. Matthew Etherington (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 61.

<sup>13</sup> B. B. Warfield, Mark A. Noll, and David N. Livingstone, *Evolution, Scripture, and Science: Selected Writings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 14.

<sup>14</sup> Warfield, Noll, and Livingstone, *Evolution, Scripture, and Science*, 165.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. “Let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master.” Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.18.

<sup>16</sup> George Johnson, “Scientists on Religion,” *Scientific American* 295, no. 4 (2006): 94.

<sup>17</sup> In § 2.2.1, I define intellectual honesty for this particular inquiry. For the moment, this definition is suitable: “Intellectual honesty is honesty in the acquisition, analysis, and transmission of ideas.” “Intellectual Honesty,” RationalWiki, accessed December 8, 2022, [https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Intellectual\\_honesty](https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Intellectual_honesty).

*intellectually honest* than Christian faith. This general objection may be termed *the dishonesty objection to the Christian faith from science*, hereafter referred to as *the dishonesty objection*.

## 1.2 Steel-Manning the Dishonesty Objection

Christian apologist Paul Chamberlain rightly maintains that “we are not in a position to respond to objections raised against our faith until we understand them and are able to express them in a way that is recognizable by those who voice them.”<sup>18</sup> At a minimum, this means avoiding the informal logical fallacy of straw-manning, which consists in presenting a distorted, weaker version of an opponent’s position and then rejecting the distortion as if it were the opponent’s position itself. Christians in particular ought to listen before answering,<sup>19</sup> examine more than one side of a matter,<sup>20</sup> consider “planks” in their own *intellectual* eyes first,<sup>21</sup> and apply Jesus’ teaching to the life of the mind in general:<sup>22</sup>

Intellectual understanding is one of the best versions of the Golden Rule: Listen to others as you would have others listen to you. ... Put in terms of Kant’s categorical imperative, When addressing someone else’s ideas, your obligation is to treat them as you believe all human beings *ought* to treat one another’s ideas.<sup>23</sup>

If Christians are meant to “love [their] enemies” and “do good to those who hate [them],”<sup>24</sup> kindness and hospitality toward mere intellectual opponents ought to be forthcoming.

The opposite of straw-manning is called steel-manning: “taking the views of one’s opponent and presenting them in the strongest light possible.”<sup>25</sup> The goals of steel-manning

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Chamberlain, *Why People Don’t Believe: Confronting Seven Challenges to Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 15.

<sup>19</sup> Prov. 18:13. Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

<sup>20</sup> Prov. 18:17.

<sup>21</sup> Matt. 7:3-5; Luke 6:41 (NIV).

<sup>22</sup> See Luke 6:31.

<sup>23</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *My Many Selves: The Quest for a Plausible Harmony* (Logan, UT: Utah State University, 2006), 217.

<sup>24</sup> Luke 6:27.

<sup>25</sup> Randal Rauser, *Conversations with My Inner Atheist: A Christian Apologist Explores Questions That Keep People up at Night* (USA: 2 Cup, 2020), 5.

include the following: (a) to avoid the intellectually-dishonest, self-deceptive fallacy of straw-manning; (b) to provide a fair, even improved, articulation of the opposing view, with which one's opponent could agree; so that (c) one's argument might be stronger and more intellectually honest than it would have been otherwise.

Steel-manning is not without risks. One might end up strengthening an opposing position, giving its adherents even more reason to remain entrenched in it. "Equally disturbing is the possibility that you might find yourself being persuaded by your own sympathetic defense."<sup>26</sup> However, if "all truth is God's truth"—if Jesus *is* the truth<sup>27</sup>—then Christians have nothing to fear from probing the most troubling questions: "As Christians, we're called to a radical life of intellectual honesty, and that includes wrestling with questions and doubt."<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, the following sections serve a dual purpose as they focus on several accusations, or sub-objections, inherent to the dishonesty objection: (a) to show intellectual hospitality toward skeptical readers, and (b) to persuade Christian readers that the dishonesty objection is implied in prominent skeptical literature and warrants a serious response. Instead of focussing on Dawkins alone, I will refer to the general "skeptic," who represents a steel-manned composite of voices that criticize Christianity (often via criticisms of religion in general) along the lines of the dishonesty objection.<sup>29</sup> The skeptic might argue that a genuinely steel-manned treatment would be longer, differently reasoned, etc. Nonetheless, this effort is the most potent form of the dishonesty objection I can imagine for this space and purpose. Importantly, this work is not intended to impugn the character of any specific person or group as intellectually

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<sup>26</sup> Rauser, *Conversations with My Inner Atheist*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> John 14:6. For further consideration, see note in § 2.2.3.2.

<sup>28</sup> Rauser, *Conversations with My Inner Atheist*, 5–6.

<sup>29</sup> For the sake of clarity and ease of reading, I will refer to the general skeptic in masculine pronouns and to the general Christian with feminine ones. For simplicity, I will refer to criticisms made of religion in general as criticisms of Christianity—which they are.

dishonest, nor is it meant to give the simplistic, misleading impression that each skeptical author cited would agree with everything said by the others.

To consider what follows fairly, charitably, and honestly, Christians must silence their ‘inner apologists’ for a while. For the moment, the aim is not to ‘mentally interrupt’ these objections but to hear them as one would want their own reasoning to be heard. If it seems like important apologetic considerations are missing from what follows, it is because the intention here is to fairly develop a skeptical line of reasoning *to be addressed in later chapters*. To be clear, *I am not suggesting that every statement below is accurate or fair*, but neither am I suggesting that each statement below is necessarily *untrue* or *unfair*. What follows (§§ 1.2.1 – 1.2.5) is a ‘Devil’s advocate’ approach, not unlike apologist Randal Rauser’s *Conversations with My Inner Atheist* or C. S. Lewis’s *Screwtape Letters*.<sup>30</sup>

### 1.2.1 *Science Is More Open to Correction*

The initial thrust of the dishonesty objection is that the Christian faith is not open to correction. “When a science book is wrong, ... it is corrected in subsequent books,” Dawkins observes, but the truth of Christianity is “an axiom, not the end product of a process of reasoning.”<sup>31</sup> As atheist philosopher Peter Boghossian puts it, “an atheist is willing to revise their belief (if provided sufficient evidence); the faithful permit no such revision.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, believers have “started with their conclusion and reasoned backward. ... They’ve started with the idea not only that God exists but that a very specific God exists—and they’ve asked themselves how they know this is true. They’ve put their metaphysics before their epistemology.”<sup>33</sup> For atheist

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<sup>30</sup> *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1942).

<sup>31</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 319.

<sup>32</sup> Peter G. Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone, 2013), 28.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Boghossian in Sam Harris and Peter Boghossian, “Street Epistemology: An Interview with Peter Boghossian,” *Sam Harris* (blog), November 29, 2013, <https://samharris.org/street-epistemology/>.

philosopher and neuroscientist Sam Harris, “religious faith is the one species of human ignorance that will not admit of even the *possibility* of correction.”<sup>34</sup>

In sharp contrast with Christianity, the scientific community is willing to see their theories corrected and even proven wrong if that is where the evidence leads. While pride and other vices can sometimes hinder honesty in science, there is nonetheless an awareness of fallibility—an *I-could-be-wrongness*—foundational to scientific methodology when it operates *at its best*.<sup>35</sup> Physicist Tom McLeish, a Christian himself, observes, “to make science work, we have continually to admit our own ignorance to each other. ... Nothing moves on much if we do not pluck up the courage to ask basic questions.”<sup>36</sup> In science, there is nothing honest or admirable about dogmatic loyalty to a particular theory or conclusion before investigation—focussing on discoveries and evidence to support it while downplaying, even ignoring, anything to the contrary. Yet the Christian faith employs this very sort of double standard: “When rational inquiry supports the creed it is always championed; when it poses a threat, it is derided. ... Only when the evidence for a religious doctrine is thin or nonexistent, or [when] there is compelling evidence against it, do its adherents invoke ‘faith.’”<sup>37</sup>

Prominent Christian apologist William Lane Craig employs such a double standard. Arguing for a “ministerial use of reason,” which “submits to and serves the gospel,”<sup>38</sup> Craig says Christianity is not ultimately based on argument and evidence: “We *know* Christianity is true primarily by the self-authenticating witness of God’s Spirit. We *show* Christianity is true by

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<sup>34</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 223.

<sup>35</sup> To fairly tease out the dishonesty objection in its most potent form, we must resist the urge to prematurely dismiss it based on examples of science *at its worst*.

<sup>36</sup> Tom McLeish, *Faith and Wisdom in Science* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2014), 30.

<sup>37</sup> Sam Harris, “An Atheist Manifesto,” *Sam Harris* (blog), December 7, 2005, <https://samharris.org/an-atheist-manifesto/>.

<sup>38</sup> William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 47; emphasis removed.

presenting good arguments for its central tenets.”<sup>39</sup> “Should a conflict arise between the witness of the Holy Spirit to the fundamental truth of the Christian faith and beliefs based on argument and evidence, then it is the former which must take precedence over the latter, not vice versa.”<sup>40</sup>

For humanist philosopher Stephen Law, Craig’s approach exemplifies an Intellectual Black Hole: “To those trapped inside, the core beliefs may *appear* quite sensible. But that appearance is illusory—a product of the belief system’s ability to disable the truth-detecting power of reason and get its victims to embrace instead habits of thought that are deceptive and unreliable.”<sup>41</sup> With his conclusion in advance, Craig knows his faith is true because of the Holy Spirit, enabling him to discount any evidence against his faith—including any evidence against the Holy Spirit’s existence. This fails “the litmus test for reasonableness: ... anyone who wants to know how the world is, whether in physical or spiritual terms, will be open to new evidence.”<sup>42</sup>

Notably, many Christians have been, and are, intellectually honest enough to change their minds on issues peripheral to the central tenets of the faith, such as the moral status of slavery or the structure of our planetary system. The problem is not that Christians dismiss objections outright; rather, the issue concerns the very core of the faith: Christians engage with objections without authentic openness toward the possibility that Christianity itself might be false.

In summary, a good scientist follows the evidence where it leads, but a ‘good’ Christian remains steadfast amid arguments and evidence that challenge her faith. Genuine open-mindedness—intellectual honesty—concerning new evidence requires openness toward

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<sup>39</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 58; emphasis in original.

<sup>40</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 48.

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Law, *Believing Bullshit: How Not to Get Sucked into an Intellectual Black Hole* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2011), 10.

<sup>42</sup> Harris, *The End of Faith*, 225.

correction. Devoted Christian faith is not open-minded toward new, corrective evidence concerning core ‘research questions’ such as *Has God indeed spoken?* or *Is Jesus really Lord?*

### 1.2.2 *Science Is More Self-Critical*

The epistemological disparity between science and Christian faith runs deeper regarding self-criticism. Scientists are not merely *open* to correction; they *seek* correction by trying to falsify reigning scientific ideas (theories).

#### 1.2.2.1 Methodology

It would be an oversimplification to speak of a monolithic “scientific method” across every scientific discipline.<sup>43</sup> However, it is fair to say that self-criticism is broadly common to science in its various forms: rigorously seeking disconfirming evidence, repeating experiments, and relying on peer review. As such, science enjoys a “built-in corrective mechanism—hypothesis testing—that weeds out false claims.”<sup>44</sup> Christian biologist Dennis Venema explains:

A scientific theory ... starts with a guess of sorts ... and asks *why* the facts are the way they are. The result is a hypothesis—the technical term for “educated guess.” A scientist can use that hypothesis to form a prediction: if this is why things are the way they are, then *such and such* should be the case. Then an experiment can be set up to test the prediction, and the result will either support or fail to support the hypothesis. If the prediction is not supported, a scientist will reject the hypothesis. If the prediction is supported by the experiment, the scientist will *fail to reject* the hypothesis. Note that this is not the same as “accepting” the hypothesis—an important distinction within science. *Accepting* a hypothesis would mean that no further tests would be required. ...

In science, a hypothesis that is *not rejected* after many, many predictions and tests eventually becomes a broad explanatory framework that has withstood repeated

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<sup>43</sup> See Hanne Andersen and Brian Hepburn, “Scientific Method,” ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, October 5, 2020), accessed December 9, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/scientific-method/>.

<sup>44</sup> Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 157.

experimentation and that makes accurate predictions about the natural world: in other words, a theory.<sup>45</sup>

For atheist biologist Jerry A. Coyne, this built-in self-correction gives science “a huge advantage over [so-called] ‘other ways of knowing,’”<sup>46</sup> “including revelation.”<sup>47</sup> As Harris points out, Christianity offers no “valid mechanism by which [its] *core* beliefs can be tested and revised.”<sup>48</sup>

### 1.2.2.2 Incentives

Scientists are incentivized to be self-critical: “If a scientist can demonstrate that a popular scientific claim is false, she can become famous, get tenure, publish her results, earn more money, and become respected by her peers. Moreover, the more prominent the defeated hypothesis, the greater the reward.”<sup>49</sup> As Venema notes, “there is not a biologist on the planet that would not dearly love to overthrow evolution and replace it with an even better theory.”<sup>50</sup>

Christians skeptical of mainstream science may object, arguing that such incentives might motivate scientists to *avoid* honest self-criticism: maintaining fame and income from grants. Indeed, scientists sometimes are “reluctant to part with theories that have made them famous, and paradigms do get entrenched in some fields ..., for scientists are, with good reason, conservative.”<sup>51</sup> Yes, some scientists have engaged in outright dishonesty toward the public.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Dennis R. Venema and Scot McKnight, *Adam and the Genome: Reading Scripture After Genetic Science* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2017), 4.

<sup>46</sup> Jerry A. Coyne, *Faith versus Fact: Why Science and Religion Are Incompatible* (New York: Viking, 2015), 223.

<sup>47</sup> Coyne, *Faith versus Fact*, 150.

<sup>48</sup> Harris, *The End of Faith*, 31; emphasis added.

<sup>49</sup> Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 157. On the same page, Boghossian notes that this strongly contradicts “the bizarre notion,” which tends to be popular in certain expressions of Christianity, “that there’s a vast conspiracy among scientists to suppress certain lines of research.” The skeptic’s point here is *not* that scientists are motivated to twist or fabricate results to achieve fame; rather, the point is that there is an incentive to be rigorously self-critical and judicious about one’s own conclusions in science that has no parallel in Christianity.

<sup>50</sup> Venema and McKnight, *Adam & the Genome*, 11.

<sup>51</sup> Coyne, *Faith versus Fact*, 223. Here Coyne provides “the idea that continents don’t move” as an example of a once-entrenched paradigm.

<sup>52</sup> See, e.g., Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*, Tenth Anniversary Edition. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019).

However, the key takeaway should be that the larger scientific community can be relied upon to expose such things; “ambition and the desire to know”—science *at its best*—“will ultimately lead to good science driving out the bad.”<sup>53</sup>

Notably, “even if individual scientists are motivated by fame, their fame cannot be long-lasting unless their work can be replicated by others.” E.g., the Piltdown Man forgery “was eventually exposed [by] more science. It didn’t fit with the pattern of evidence as it accumulated, so eventually, it was revisited.”<sup>54</sup> Likewise, it is true that “throughout all of human history the universe was regarded as fixed and immutable[,] and the idea that it might actually be changing”—*expanding*—“was inconceivable.”<sup>55</sup> Einstein himself “was so sure that the universe had to be static that he modified his theory to make this possible.”<sup>56</sup> But again, science *at its best* eventually overcame this entrenched paradigm. Einstein admitted that he had been wrong.<sup>57</sup>

Christian critics of mainstream science are quick to point out that the incentives for honest self-criticism do not always function perfectly or immediately in science—for science is not always at its best; however, the relevant point here is that if anything, the incentive for Christianity runs the other way: “if a preacher states that the claims of his faith tradition are false, he’s excommunicated, defrocked, or otherwise forced to abandon his position.”<sup>58</sup> Thus,

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<sup>53</sup> Coyne, *Faith versus Fact*, 223.

<sup>54</sup> Dennis R. Venema, in a conversation via private message with the author, February 1, 2021; e.g., Frank Spencer, *The Piltdown Papers, 1908-1955: The Correspondence and Other Documents Relating to the Piltdown Forgery* (London: Natural History Museum, 1990).

<sup>55</sup> Gregory L. Naber, *Spacetime and Singularities: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988), 127.

<sup>56</sup> Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bantam Books, 1998), 42.

<sup>57</sup> Although it was resisted at first, the ostensible amenability of an expanding universe toward theism did not ultimately prevent science *at its best* from honestly following the evidence: for many, an expanding universe suggests a discrete beginning (i.e., creation), which is more readily compatible with theism than an eternal, static universe (although even a static universe would yet lack an explanation for its self-existence). See Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, chaps. 3–4.

<sup>58</sup> Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 157.

Christianity strongly avoids genuine self-criticism. Scientists “try to prove [their own] claims false,” while “faith leaders ... unequivocally state that their faith claims are true.”<sup>59</sup>

### 1.2.2.3 Confirmation Bias

Incentivized, self-critical methodology enables the scientific community to effectively mitigate the ordinary human “tendency to process information by looking for, or interpreting, information that is consistent with one’s existing beliefs”:<sup>60</sup> confirmation bias. Boghossian argues that this is a severe problem for Christians:

Nearly all of the faithful suffer from an acute form of confirmation bias: they start with a core belief first and work their way backward to specific beliefs. For example, if one starts with a belief in Christ as divine, any discussion of evidence—tombs, witnesses, etc.—will almost always be futile. Any piece of contradictory evidence one brings into the discussion will never be sufficient to warrant a change in belief.

Contradictory evidence will be discarded as anomalous, offensive, irrelevant, preposterous, or highly unlikely.<sup>61</sup>

Scientists work to minimize and counteract confirmation bias, but for Christians, it is a mark of piety. When faced with doubts, apologists such as Craig instruct students to “take them to God in prayer and ask Him to help ... resolve them.”<sup>62</sup> But “asking people to ‘just pray about it’ pushes them into a form of confirmation bias where the very act of prayer means they’ve already bought back into the system.”<sup>63</sup> To his credit, Craig also exhorts his readers to “pursue [their] doubts into the ground,”<sup>64</sup> which involves arguments and evidence—but only with safeguards against too much intellectual honesty: doubt is not just a matter of reason, but a tool

<sup>59</sup> Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 157.

<sup>60</sup> Bettina J. Casad and J. E. Luebering, “Confirmation Bias,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 3, 2023, accessed March 16, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/science/confirmation-bias>.

<sup>61</sup> Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 72–73.

<sup>62</sup> William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 35.

<sup>63</sup> Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 126.

<sup>64</sup> Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 41; emphasis removed.

of Satan in “a battle for your very soul.”<sup>65</sup> Reason must not “usurp the magisterial role and take the place of the Holy Spirit,”<sup>66</sup> whose self-authenticating witness “makes it evident to us that our faith is true.”<sup>67</sup> This is an exercise in self-deception, not self-criticism.

To approach the matter with intellectual honesty, minister-turned-atheist John W. Loftus holds that “we need some sort of objective, unbiased, non-double-standard type of test in order to investigate what we were taught to believe,” which he calls the Outsider Test for Faith.<sup>68</sup> For Loftus, “the only way to rationally test one’s culturally adopted religious faith is from the perspective of an outsider, a nonbeliever, with the same level of reasonable skepticism believers already use when examining the other religious faiths they reject.”<sup>69</sup> This much more closely approximates the self-critical rigour of the sciences:

When Christians examine the claim that Muhammad rode on a flying horse, they should do so by way of a reasonable and informed skepticism, just as ... when considering claims such as levitating Buddhists or the magical properties of Mormon holy underwear or the existence of the Scientologists’ evil Thetans that supposedly infest our bodies. Christian believers should examine the specific extraordinary claims of Christianity using the same kind of skepticism. ... “Do unto your own faith what you do unto other faiths.” ... [Believers should] subject their own faith to the same level of reasonable skepticism they use when rejecting other faiths, which is the skepticism of an outsider, a nonbeliever.<sup>70</sup>

#### 1.2.2.4 Self-Criticism vs. Self-Defence

Far from offering any “valid mechanism by which ... core beliefs can be tested and revised,”<sup>71</sup> Christianity has built-in methods of *preventing* any testing and correction of its core beliefs. Harris calls this “a conversation-stopper. Religion,” he says, “is the only area of our

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<sup>65</sup> Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 33.

<sup>66</sup> Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 38.

<sup>67</sup> Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 35.

<sup>68</sup> John W. Loftus, *The Outsider Test for Faith: How to Know Which Religion Is True* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2013), 15.

<sup>69</sup> Loftus, *The Outsider Test for Faith*, 16–17.

<sup>70</sup> Loftus, *The Outsider Test for Faith*, 23.

<sup>71</sup> Harris, *The End of Faith*, 31.

discourse in which people are systematically protected from the demand to give evidence in defense of their strongly held beliefs.”<sup>72</sup> If Christians were sincerely interested in the truth as much as scientists are, they would be just as interested in evidence *against* the faith as they are in evidence *for* it. But instead of self-correction, Christians have developed methods of self-defence, such as apologetics itself—a branch of Christian thought entirely devoted to defending the faith. More generally, while a good scientist proactively and rigorously tests his views against the evidence, the Christian is admonished *not* to test her God.<sup>73</sup> It is more blessed to believe without seeing, relying on faith instead.<sup>74</sup> As Dawkins puts it, faith

means blind trust, in the absence of evidence, *even in the teeth of evidence*. The story of Doubting Thomas is told, not so that we shall admire Thomas, but so that we can admire the other apostles in comparison. Thomas demanded evidence. ... The other apostles, whose faith was so strong that they did not need evidence, are held up to us as worthy of imitation.<sup>75</sup>

Believers are thus exhorted to “stand firm” in the truth of their faith,<sup>76</sup> expecting to be seen by outsiders as “fools for the sake of Christ.”<sup>77</sup> After all, “the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.”<sup>78</sup> Christians are taught in Scripture that their faith gives them a superior view of things; when outsiders see their faith as foolishness, it only feeds into their confirmation bias:

The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for, “Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?”<sup>79</sup> But we have the mind of Christ.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Harris, “An Atheist Manifesto.”

<sup>73</sup> Deut. 6:16; Matt. 4:7; Luke 4:12.

<sup>74</sup> John 20:29.

<sup>75</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 30th Anniversary ed. (Oxford: Oxford University, 2006), 198; emphasis added.

<sup>76</sup> Eph. 6:14.

<sup>77</sup> 1 Cor. 4:10 (NRSV).

<sup>78</sup> 1 Cor. 1:18.

<sup>79</sup> Here the Apostle Paul quotes Isa. 64:4.

<sup>80</sup> 1 Cor. 2:14-16 (NIV).

This raises the most egregious example of systematic protection of faith from scrutiny: biblical proclamations against false teaching. Essentially, any teacher who disagrees with the gospel is ultimately deceived and unworthy of trust on matters of theology: they are to “be accursed.”<sup>81</sup> Instead of honestly questioning *all the way down* whether the faith is worthy of assent, Christians ‘know’ in advance that *agreement with the gospel* is the very criterion for trustworthiness: “every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.”<sup>82</sup>

It appears that Christians are encouraged to engage in a form of the genetic fallacy:<sup>83</sup> although they may engage with objections to the core of the faith for academic or apologetic reasons, they can be assured that such objections are ultimately misguided (despite any incidental merit or valid, peripheral criticism) because they are formulated by unbelieving minds, blinded by sin. Moreover, biblical recourse to explain away unbelief is plentiful: doubters are “rocky soil,” “blinded” by “the god of this world,” and lacking “ears to hear.”<sup>84</sup> Skeptics have a “pretension ... against the knowledge of God” and “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”<sup>85</sup>

The *ad hominem* fallacy may also apply,<sup>86</sup> for believers are instructed to dismiss the arguments of “wolves,” “false teachers,”<sup>87</sup> “liars,” and even “the antichrist”:

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<sup>81</sup> Gal. 1:8-9.

<sup>82</sup> 1 John 4:2-3.

<sup>83</sup> “This is the [informal logical] fallacy of arguing that a belief is mistaken or false because of the way that belief originated.” Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 57. The use of biblical passages in this section is not intended to commit me to a thorough exegesis, but to show that *from the skeptic’s point of view*, these verses may be suggestive of the fallacies mentioned. The goal of this thesis is not to examine these passages to prove that they commit no such fallacies. Although objections to the Bible based on alleged genetic fallacies (etc.) are not commonly voiced by Christianity’s critics, they are a reasonable extension of the dishonesty objection (steel-manning), and they are helpful for highlighting the issue of authority, which comes to the fore in later chapters. See §§ 2.4.3, 3.3.2.2.

<sup>84</sup> Luke 8:13; 2 Cor. 4:4; Mark 4:23.

<sup>85</sup> 2 Cor. 10:5 (NIV); Rom. 1:18.

<sup>86</sup> “One of the most common types of irrelevant appeals is the *argumentum ad hominem*, the argument directed against the speaker rather than toward what the speaker is saying.” Robert J. Gula, *Nonsense: Red Herrings, Straw Men, and Sacred Cows: How We Abuse Logic in Our Everyday Language* (Mount Jackson, VA: Axios, 2007), 56–7.

<sup>87</sup> Acts 20:29; 2 Pet. 2:1.

Who is the liar except the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. ...

These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you. And as for you, the anointing which you received from Him remains in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you remain in Him.”<sup>88</sup>

With convenient, self-authenticating circularity, passages such as these affirm believers’ confirmation bias, providing grounds to ultimately dismiss skeptical objections about the core of the Christian faith: such objections come from people who are deceived, if not evil.

Instead of honest, scientific self-criticism, Christians engage in pre-emptive criticism—even demonization—of disagreements with their core beliefs. In science, it would be grossly unacceptable to enshrine agreement with a given theory or paradigm, such as Newtonian mechanics, as a final, non-negotiable criterion for whether any future discoveries or theories were worthy of consideration. Quantum mechanics would never have been developed if anyone disagreeing with Newton had been labelled a false scientist *by definition*. At its best, science operates with incentivized, self-critical methodology; however, good Christians—at their best—operate with incentivized, self-defensive methodology.

### 1.2.3 Science Better Embraces Falsification

The fact that Christian faith is so resistant to correction and self-criticism *in practice* (at least for core beliefs, where it matters most) suggests that it is unassailable, or non-falsifiable, *in principle*. As atheist philosopher Alex Rosenberg puts it, Christian faith is “*immune to rational objection*. Often [atheists] are wasting [their] time refuting it.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> 1 John 2:22-27.

<sup>89</sup> Alex Rosenberg, *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without Illusions* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), viii; emphasis added.

Falsification plays a vital role in science, perhaps most famously articulated by Karl Popper, a philosopher of science. For Popper, “if a theory is incompatible with possible empirical observations[,] it is scientific [i.e., falsifiable]; conversely, a theory which is compatible with all such observations ... is unscientific [i.e., non-falsifiable].”<sup>90</sup> Put another way, if a theory can be made to fit with any and all possible evidence, then it does not count as a scientific theory; it is non-falsifiable. Dawkins expresses a Popperian view when distinguishing science from religious belief: “my belief in evolution is ... not faith, because I know what it would take to change my mind, and I would gladly do so if the necessary evidence were forthcoming.”<sup>91</sup>

### 1.2.3.1 Falsification and the Skeptic

The ability to describe the conditions under which one’s belief would be falsified is essential for intellectual honesty. As skeptical scientist and philosopher Victor J. Stenger points out, skeptics of religion can do so:

Within our existing knowledge we do not have a credible reason for requiring anything transcendent to explain anything we experience or observe. All science is provisional, and if sufficient evidence that meets all the most rigorous scientific tests were to come along to demonstrate the existence of a world beyond matter and energy, then nonbelieving scientists will change their minds.<sup>92</sup>

Importantly, “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence”<sup>93</sup>—especially supernatural claims—but the key is that skeptics can articulate what would be required to falsify atheism. For

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<sup>90</sup> Stephen Thornton, “Karl Popper,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, August 7, 2018), accessed March 16, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/popper/>.

<sup>91</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 320.

<sup>92</sup> Victor J. Stenger, “The Folly of Faith: The Incompatibility of Science and Christianity,” in *Christianity Is Not Great: How Faith Fails*, ed. John W. Loftus (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2014), 68–69.

<sup>93</sup> This phrase was popularized by Carl Sagan in *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*, directed by Adrian Malone (PBS, 1980), and it is a favourite among skeptical authors. Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 11; Coyne, *Faith versus Fact*, 119; Harris, *The End of Faith*, 41. This phrase is likely a rewording of a similar statement by Laplace:

Coyne, a sufficiently extraordinary scene would feature Jesus' appearance in the sky, accompanied by angels, apostles, and healings of amputees:

If this were all witnessed by others and documented by video, and if the healings were unexplainable but supported by testimony from multiple doctors, and if all the apparitions and events conformed to Christian theology—then I'd have to start thinking seriously about the truth of Christianity. Perhaps such eyewitness evidence isn't even necessary. If, as [Carl] Sagan suggested, the New Testament contained unequivocal information about DNA, evolution, quantum mechanics, or other scientific phenomena that couldn't have been known to its authors, it would be hard not to accept some divine inspiration.<sup>94</sup>

Unlike scientists and skeptics, most adherents of the Christian faith cannot specify what it would take to make them change their minds and abandon their faith. "While some will actually give thoughtful responses, what you'll hear most often is the answer of Karl Giberson," for whom "*no data could dispel his belief in God*":<sup>95</sup>

As a believer in God, I am convinced *in advance* that the world is not an accident and that, in some mysterious way, our existence is an "expected" result. Thus, I do not look at natural history as a source of data to determine whether or not the world has purpose. Rather, my approach is to anticipate that the facts of natural history will be compatible with the purpose and meaning I have encountered elsewhere. And my understanding of science does nothing to dissuade me from this conviction.<sup>96</sup>

As a purely *practical* matter, I have compelling reasons to believe in God. My parents are deeply committed Christians and would be devastated, were I to reject my faith. My wife and children believe in God, and we attend church together regularly. Most of my friends are believers. I have a job I love at a Christian college that would be forced to dismiss me if I were to reject the faith that underpins the mission of the college. Abandoning belief in God would be disruptive, sending my life completely off the rails.<sup>97</sup>

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"the weight of evidence for an extraordinary claim must be proportioned to its strangeness." Patrizio E. Tressoldi, "Extraordinary Claims Require Extraordinary Evidence: The Case of Non-Local Perception, a Classical and Bayesian Review of Evidences," *Frontiers in Psychology* 2 (June 10, 2011): 117.

<sup>94</sup> Coyne, *Faith versus Fact*, 118–19.

<sup>95</sup> Coyne, *Faith versus Fact*, 119.

<sup>96</sup> Karl W. Giberson, *Saving Darwin: How to Be a Christian and Believe in Evolution* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 213.

<sup>97</sup> Giberson, *Saving Darwin*, 155–56.

Thus, for Coyne, religious faith “is often maintained by social utility. ... [I]f no conceivable evidence can shake your faith in a theistic God, then you’ve deliberately removed yourself from rational discourse.”<sup>98</sup>

In the spirit of Loftus’s Outsider Test for Faith, atheist philosopher Matt McCormick proposes the Defeasibility Test. He does so in response to Christian intellectuals who appear “more deeply resolved to continue believing than they are to any principles of reasoning that might lead them to reconsider their theism.”<sup>99</sup>

Before I or any other doubter, atheist, skeptic, or non-believer engages in a discussion about the reasons for and against God, the believer must look deep into his heart and mind and ask this question: Are there any considerations, arguments, evidence, or reasons, even hypothetically[,] that could possibly lead me to change my mind about God? Is it even a remotely possible outcome that in carefully and thoughtfully reflecting on the broadest and most even body of evidence that I can grasp, that I would come to think that my current view about God is mistaken? That is to say, is my belief defeasible?

If the answer is no, then we’re done. There is nothing informative, constructive, or interesting to be found in your contribution to dialogue. Anything you have to say amounts to sophistry. We can’t take your input any more seriously than the lawyer who is a master of casuistry and who can provide rhetorically masterful defenses of every side of an issue. She’s not interested in the truth, only in scoring debate points or the construction of elaborate rhetorical castles (that float on air).<sup>100</sup>

### 1.2.3.2 Falsification and Other Ways of Knowing

The unassailable character of the Christian faith is made evident in their appeals to “other ways of knowing,”<sup>101</sup> such as one made in response to Dawkins at a science-religion conference:

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<sup>98</sup> Coyne, *Faith versus Fact*, 120. I respond to Coyne’s reading of Giberson in a footnote near the end of § 2.4.3.2.

<sup>99</sup> Matt McCormick, “The Defeasibility Test,” *Atheism: Proving the Negative* (blog), February 5, 2011, <http://www.provingthenegative.com/2011/02/defeasibility-test.html>.

<sup>100</sup> McCormick, “The Defeasibility Test.”

<sup>101</sup> E.g., “Science is not the only way of knowing. The spiritual worldview provides another way of finding truth. Scientists who deny this would be well advised to consider the limits of their own tools, as nicely represented in a parable told by the astronomer Arthur Eddington. He described a man who set about to study deep-sea life using a net that had a mesh size of three inches. After catching many wild and wonderful creatures from the depths, the man concluded that there are no deep-sea fish that are smaller than three inches in length! If we are using the scientific net to catch our particular version of truth, we should not be surprised that it does not catch the evidence of spirit.” Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 229.

The strongest response I heard was that I was brutally foisting a scientific epistemology upon an unwilling theology. ... Scientific arguments ... were inappropriate since theologians had always maintained that God lay outside science. ...

[These] theologians ... were *defining* themselves into an epistemological Safe Zone where rational argument could not reach them because they had *declared by fiat* that it could not. ... There are other ways of knowing besides the scientific, and it is one of these other ways of knowing that must be deployed to know God.<sup>102</sup>

By invoking “other ways of knowing,” Christian faith insulates itself from being corrected to the point where it cannot be falsified. This exemplifies “how an impregnable fortress can be constructed around even a ridiculous set of beliefs, rendering them immune to rational criticism and creating a veneer of faux reasonableness.”<sup>103</sup> Christians have thus “created impossible conditions” for falsification, which is “not the intellectual attitude one has when forming one’s beliefs on the basis of reason and evidence.”<sup>104</sup>

Occasionally, Christian apologists will argue that the hypothetical discovery of the bones of Jesus Christ would falsify their faith.<sup>105</sup> Critically, however, they fail to state how such a find could be verified.<sup>106</sup> Such meagre, hypothetical vulnerability toward faith-falsifying evidence is not enough; intellectual honesty requires seeking such evidence with the rigour of a scientist testing a physical theory. Being able to “assimilate to itself all facts,”<sup>107</sup> Christianity is non-falsifiable in the Popperian sense: it can be made to fit with all possible evidence.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 183–84.

<sup>103</sup> Law, *Believing BS*, 11.

<sup>104</sup> Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 61.

<sup>105</sup> These apologists usually refer to 1 Cor. 15:14. E.g., William Lane Craig and Sean McDowell, “Can I Get a Witness?,” *Sean McDowell* (blog), March 14, 2016, <https://seanmcdowell.org/blog/can-i-get-a-witness>; William Lane Craig, “Would Finding Jesus’ Corpse Falsify Christianity?,” *Reasonable Faith* (blog), November 20, 2016, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/would-finding-jesus-corpse-falsify-christianity>.

<sup>106</sup> I address this objection in § 5.1.3.

<sup>107</sup> Warfield, Noll, and Livingstone, *Evolution, Scripture, and Science*, 165.

<sup>108</sup> Thornton, “Karl Popper.”

### 1.2.4 *Science Is More Intellectually Humble*

Faced with the charge that science has greater intellectual humility, Christians may point out that scientists can be proud, biased, or dishonest. Human frailty indeed exists in all camps. As detailed above, however, science has built-in, intentional practices to mitigate human frailty, whereas Christianity does not. This is made clear by comparing science's provisional, humble nature with the confident finality of Christian preaching.

#### 1.2.4.1 Scientific Confidence as Provisional

In the technical sense, “all science is provisional.”<sup>109</sup> “Many theories in science are so well established that it is highly unlikely that new evidence will substantially modify them,” but “scientists don’t ever fully ‘accept’ them as ‘true’ or ‘proven.’”<sup>110</sup> As discussed above, science is “so committed to fallibilism that it enshrines within its methodology a commitment to falsify scientific hypotheses;” thus, science “is predicated on a unique humility.”<sup>111</sup> At its best, science is always meaningfully aware that tomorrow’s discoveries might adjust, if not entirely overturn, a way of looking at things widely accepted today.<sup>112</sup>

Importantly, however, this humility should not be taken to mean that every scientific theory is equally vulnerable to change:

To say that a given scientific theory may be wrong is not to say that it may be wrong in its every particular, or that any other theory stands an equal chance of being right. What are the chances that DNA is *not* the basis for genetic inheritance? ... Any account of inheritance that is going to supersede the present assumptions of molecular biology will have to account for the ocean of data that now conforms to these assumptions. What are the chances that ... DNA has *absolutely nothing* to do with inheritance? They are effectively zero.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Stenger, “The Folly of Faith: The Incompatibility of Science and Christianity,” 68.

<sup>110</sup> Venema and McKnight, *Adam & the Genome*, 4.

<sup>111</sup> Randal Rauser, *Theology in Search of Foundations* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2009), 90–91.

<sup>112</sup> See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Chicago University, 1970).

<sup>113</sup> Harris, *The End of Faith*, 76.

In fact, the provisional character of science is a strength, not a weakness:

The basis of our confidence, ironically, is the *fallibility* of scientists as continually demonstrated by other scientists. ... Every significant new claim, and a lot of insignificant ones, are sooner or later checked and almost never completely replicated. More often, they are corrected, refined, and improved on—assuming the claims aren't refuted altogether. Because of this error-reducing process, the further back you go from the research frontier, the more the claims have been refined, reformulated, tested, and grounded.<sup>114</sup>

Scientific theories are thus not provisional in a vacuum, as though they might change due to the passage of time alone; rather, they are provisional *with respect to the relevant evidence*. A cosmologist might assign an extremely high confidence value to a heliocentric view of the solar system—to the point where it would be personally irresponsible to hold out for substantial change—but even if he *colloquially* speaks of it as “a scientific fact,” he never has the licence to dismiss tomorrow's discoveries in advance. To claim that sort of final, invulnerable certainty would be to declare independence from nature as a source of knowledge. All science is provisional in that no scientist ever ‘graduates’ from paying due attention to nature.

#### 1.2.4.2 Christian Faith Preached as Final

The epistemological arrogance of the Christian faith, neither held nor proffered provisionally, contrasts with the intellectual humility of science. Christianity is averse to outside correction and genuine self-criticism: any public voice disagreeing with the faith—despite any valid points—is ultimately blinded by sin, self, or Satan. Add to this the Great Commission: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.”<sup>115</sup> An intellectually honest Christianity would be as interested in evidence *against* the faith as in evidence *for* it. Instead, by appealing to

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<sup>114</sup> Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*, 20.

<sup>115</sup> Mark 16:15.

ancient texts, traditions, and subjective spiritual experiences, the Christian message is *preached* to non-believers with an air of finality and authority that exceeds what anyone could have.

### 1.2.4.3 Christian Confidence as Disproportionate to Evidence

The dishonesty objection takes a particular exception to faith, which is essentially “pretending to know something you don’t know”:<sup>116</sup> “if one had sufficient evidence to warrant belief in a particular claim, then one wouldn’t believe [it] on ... faith. ‘Faith’ is the word one uses when one does not have enough evidence to justify holding a belief, but when one just goes ahead and believes [it] anyway.”<sup>117</sup> By faith, Christians illicitly bridge the gap between whatever modest probability the evidence properly affords them—e.g., forty or sixty percent—to the inflated, one-hundred-percent confidence that Christianity is true: “as such, faith is an *irrational* leap over the probabilities.”<sup>118</sup>

Christian faith is thus antithetical to the intellectual humility and restraint of science described above, which for some, is better exemplified by atheism:

Atheism is nothing more than a commitment to *the most basic standard of intellectual honesty*: One’s convictions should be proportional to one’s evidence. Pretending to be certain when one isn’t ... is both an intellectual and a moral failing.<sup>119</sup>

For their “obfuscation, rationalization, insincerity, and perhaps even outright *dishonesty*,”<sup>120</sup>

Boghossian thus chides theologians who

verbally dance around ... [the fact] that faith is an epistemology, and cloud ... [the fact] that the word *faith* is used (in religious contexts) when higher confidence values are

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<sup>116</sup> Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 24.

<sup>117</sup> Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 23.

<sup>118</sup> John W. Loftus, “Victor Reppert Now Says He Doesn’t Have Faith!,” *Debunking Christianity* (blog), October 30, 2012, <https://www.debunking-christianity.com/2012/10/victor-reppert-now-says-he-doesnt-have.html>; emphasis in original.

<sup>119</sup> Harris, “An Atheist Manifesto;” emphasis added.

<sup>120</sup> Peter Boghossian, “Faith, Epistemology, and Answering Socrates’ Question by Translation,” in *Christianity Is Not Great: How Faith Fails*, ed. John W. Loftus (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2014), 82; emphasis added.

assigned to propositions than the evidence warrants, [and] yet proudly proclaim ... that people should live their lives based upon their faith-based beliefs.<sup>121</sup>

Even allowing for a generous measure of supporting evidence, the Christian faith's final, authoritative, non-provisional attitude is egregiously disproportionate. For all its success, science is intellectually humble enough to stop short of declaring independence from future discoveries; for all its problems, the Christian faith has the audacity to *preach* that very thing, dismissing in advance all possible future contrary evidence. "Faith replaces wonder with epistemological arrogance disguised as false humility. Faith immutably alters the starting conditions for inquiry by uprooting a hunger to know and sowing a warrantless confidence."<sup>122</sup>

#### 1.2.4.4 Christian Faith Never Could Be Final

It should be clear that the final certainty exhibited by Christians is epistemologically out of reach. With perhaps more humility than most, apologist John G. Stackhouse Jr. admits that "no one can possibly list, let alone understand, much less master, the range of ideological options on offer. ... Thus the claim that 'my ideology is superior to all others' proves immediately difficult, if not flatly impossible, to demonstrate."<sup>123</sup> As with any other area of life, religious faith must reach beyond incomplete knowledge:

Steve cannot know for certain that this canoe bobbing by the dock will still float once he gets in it, but he cannot be "mostly convinced" and stay with most of his weight committed to the canoe while reserving some of his weight for the dock. To enjoy the canoe, he has to get all the way in. He has to make a commitment. He has to exercise rationally based faith.

... Parents of small children can never have an evening out if they refuse to trust any baby-sitter. A woman would be a fool to refuse to marry her beloved until the marriage had been somehow guaranteed. Life for us humans means risk, and the wise person is the

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<sup>121</sup> Boghossian, "Faith, Epistemology, and Answering Socrates' Question by Translation," 82; emphasis in original.

<sup>122</sup> Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 43.

<sup>123</sup> John G. Stackhouse Jr., *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2002), 12.

one who does not seek certainty, but seeks instead *adequate* reason to believe the best alternative available.<sup>124</sup>

Stackhouse could be describing science, which also makes intellectually humble, *provisional* commitments in the light of rigorously sought, adequate knowledge. If his canoe springs a leak, Steve opts for another; if experiments show a scientific theory to be incorrect, the scientist moves on. So also, with religion, even if today's portion of evidence and argument suggests a balance in favour of Christianity, no one can know what evidence might come to light tomorrow. It would be one thing to *recommend* their religious tradition, along with any evidence, to non-believers as one possible, tentative option. But Christians do not merely suggest a possibly adequate 'canoe'; instead, the Christian canoe is presented as perfect for all—and it is apparently evil to point out potential leaks or suggest alternatives.

Science models epistemic humility in many ways, proceeding provisionally even though it deals with the observable world. Dealing with traditions about intangible, immaterial things, Christian faith should be less confident than science. However, just the opposite is true: evangelism goes well beyond evidence by preaching the gospel as *the final truth*.

### 1.2.5 Christianity as Hypocritical Pseudoscience

Christianity condones and participates in intellectual behaviour that falls well below the standards of scientific intellectual honesty. If the situation were reversed, Christian apologists would not tolerate any of this from skeptics: being utterly closed to correction, embracing self-defence instead of self-criticism, employing non-falsifiable claims while feigning falsifiability, or claiming final certainty beyond what any evidence can justify.

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<sup>124</sup> Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 107; emphasis in original.

Christian apologists thus require skeptics to be more intellectually honest than they, themselves, are willing to be. The skeptic is to suspend his reservations and assumptions *all the way down* to honestly assess arguments and evidence for Christianity. Still, the Christian will not authentically do the same: from her holy book, she ‘knows’ in advance that the skeptic is ‘deceived.’ A double standard is evident, especially given Christians’ great admiration for former atheists who have become Christians after scrutinizing their own beliefs.<sup>125</sup>

Far from living up to scientific honesty, the Christian faith has more in common with flat-earth theories, alternative medicine, and other pseudoscience. Such approaches

tend to ignore counterevidence or reject it with special pleading; embrace unfalsifiable claims (“It won’t show up in double-blind tests,” equivalent to “You can’t test God”); accept questionable data as “proof”; argue that the scientific method doesn’t apply to their claims; reject replication and verification by outsiders and skeptics; and refuse to consider alternative hypotheses. Above all, ... an agenda not to find the truth, but to support one’s biases, emotions, and personal beliefs.<sup>126</sup>

Against intellectual hypocrisy, the skeptic calls out for “reason, rationality, honesty, authenticity, epistemic humility, and assigning confidence values in direct proportion to evidence.”<sup>127</sup>

### 1.3 The Importance of a Response

Here we reach the end of the ‘Devil’s Advocate’ presentation of the dishonesty objection, which calls for an internal and external apologetic response.<sup>128</sup> Internally, a response is needful for the believer who finds herself drifting toward fear, doubt, and unbelief when faced with the

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<sup>125</sup> E.g., C. S. Lewis is often celebrated as one such individual. For a nuanced account of his conversion, see Alister E. McGrath, *C. S. Lewis—A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2013), chap. 6.

<sup>126</sup> Coyne, *Faith versus Fact*, 238.

<sup>127</sup> Boghossian, “Faith, Epistemology, and Answering Socrates’ Question by Translation,” 84.

<sup>128</sup> “Apologetics is best deployed toward two basic goals, which we might distinguish as *internal* and *external*: (a) to strengthen and to mature the faith of Christians; and (b) to remove obstacles, and clarify issues, and offer winsome inducements to those who are not (yet) Christians.” Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 118.

dishonesty objection—a response to the (possible) misgivings and accusations raised by her own ‘intellectual conscience’.<sup>129</sup>

*Am I being honest with myself? Do my assumptions predetermine the outcome in favour of Christianity? Do I hold skeptical viewpoints to higher standards than my own? Have I arrived at my beliefs honestly? Am I truly open to the possibility that my religion is false? But if I am, how can I also be a devoted follower of Jesus Christ?*

This thesis presents a possible way to isolate and untangle this problem for those who find their Christian faith challenging to reconcile with their understanding of intellectual honesty.

Externally, and as a matter of the public integrity of Christian witness, it is crucial to hear the skeptic’s concerns as fairly and charitably as possible—but to also require the same of the skeptic. I hope that skeptics will at least agree that their concern has been heard and that future conversations about this issue might benefit from a more robust understanding of how a Christian might honestly engage with this challenge.

## 1.4 Audience

My primary audience is Christians intrigued by the dishonesty objection and especially those troubled by it. This includes those who, like me, have noticed instances of intellectual dishonesty regarding science among church leaders, authors, and speakers—leading us to question the integrity of our own faith. I hope that skeptics prone to make the dishonesty objection might read this thesis as well; to that end, I have striven to be as irenic amid disagreement as possible.<sup>130</sup>

Readers who do not sense any essential tension between science and Christian faith in the forgoing discussion may feel excluded, but that is not my intention. E.g., some of my beloved

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<sup>129</sup> This is how I, myself, came to focus on this matter.

<sup>130</sup> Too often, Christian apologists have expended (what I call) their ‘offence credits’ on straw-manning, taking cheap shots, and being needlessly disrespectful, ungentle, and rude. I am convicted that we must be judicious with our ‘offence credits,’ spending them only on the cross and other true non-negotiables.

siblings in Christ take a low view of modern science, stating publicly that most scientists—being variously incompetent, deceived, devious, etc.—widely participate in lies and conspiracies about the age of the universe, human origins, climate change, public health, etc. I hope these Christians will be challenged in their rejection of modern science. Many of our siblings in Christ are scientists: they are part of the Body of Christ, vocationally called to investigate nature and equipped to enrich the Church—not merely the seminary—by probing the glories of Creation. We must not question their competence and integrity without first hearing them as siblings on their own terms, for the ear cannot say to the eye, “I have no need of you.”<sup>131</sup>

Some may shrug at the dishonesty objection: *so, what if Christianity is a bit intellectually dishonest?* I hope this group is also challenged. I take it as self-evident that intellectual honesty is part of a Christian’s duty to love the truth. If Christian faith *at its best* requires intellectual dishonesty, something is profoundly incoherent, logically and morally, in the faith itself.<sup>132</sup>

## 1.5 Research Question

Aiming at both honest self-scrutiny and a fair response to the dishonesty objection, the research question may be stated, *Is the Christian faith less intellectually honest than science?* Specifically, the focus is whether Christian faith is less honest in the senses detailed above, regarding self-criticism, falsification, and intellectual humility, and whether this justifies such charges as intellectual hypocrisy and pseudoscience.

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<sup>131</sup> 1 Cor. 12:21.

<sup>132</sup> The idea that Christianity might be both true and yet only believable, or preach-able, by means of intellectual dishonesty is interesting and *theoretically* possible; this is not unlike a detective who cannot prove a suspect is guilty—though he is indeed guilty—and so plants evidence against him. However, as the dishonesty objection implies, it is *theologically* objectionable to think that the Christian God has set things up so that the only path to right belief is by dishonest means. I agree with the skeptic on this, so there is no need to discuss it further.

## 1.6 Hypothesis

The goal is to show that the dishonesty objection does not offer a sufficient reason for non-believers to dismiss the gospel or for believers to conclude that their Christian faith is intellectually dishonest. To that end, this thesis benefits from Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*, in which he deals with the (different) *de jure* objection that Christian belief is epistemologically unacceptable; there, he shows that this objection is dependent on a *de facto* assumption that Christianity is false in the first place.<sup>133</sup>

Similarly, the dishonesty objection depends on anti-theological assumptions. By comparing science and Christianity fairly and charitably, such assumptions are exposed: the dishonesty objection (a) tolerates from science what it considers dishonest from Christianity because (b) it excludes in advance the possibility of revealed, authoritative, and transformative theological knowledge as Christian thinkers understand it. It sets up a test that Christianity, even if true, could never pass. Behind the demand for extraordinary evidence lies a human insistence on guaranteeing to ourselves, by ourselves—*on our own terms*—the veracity of theological knowledge: this is indeed a “pretension ... against the knowledge of God.”<sup>134</sup> Thus, the research hypothesis may be stated in this way: *The charge that Christian faith is less intellectually honest than science does not follow from a comparison between the two; at its best, Christian faith is just as honest about God as the best science is about nature.*

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<sup>133</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 190–91.

<sup>134</sup> 2 Cor. 10:5 (NIV).

## Chapter 2

### Positioning a Response

The preceding chapter has considered the skeptic's *dishonesty objection* in its strongest form: Christian faith falls short of intellectual honesty as exemplified in science. Yet an honest, fair-minded exchange requires openness from *both* parties toward steel-manning the opposing view. To avoid holding the Christian to a higher, double standard, the skeptic must ask whether *he* “know[s], in advance, that nothing will budge [him] from [his position]”—whether *his* rejection of other ways of knowing is “an axiom, not the end product of a process of reasoning.”<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, this chapter invites the skeptic to adopt a *best-versus-best* approach, striving to hear a Christian response in its strongest form. Instead of responding to each accusation from chapter 1 piecemeal, I will develop a nuanced picture of the epistemological situation in which the Christian finds herself. Many of the skeptic's charges will be dealt with naturally along the way. The remaining objections will be addressed in chapter 5.

### 2.1 Project Scope

To properly appreciate this response, it may be helpful to think of this thesis as a specialized tool. This discussion lies at the far edge of normal apologetics, questioning whether a faithful Christian can be intellectually honest about ‘the whole show’ in the first place—well apart from arguments and evidence in well-trodden fields of apologetics.<sup>2</sup> While the conclusions

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<sup>1</sup> Pace Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 319. Christian readers should note that even if the skeptic does exhibit this sort of hypocrisy, it does not follow that the dishonesty objection is invalid. The intent here is to invite skeptical readers to maintain a fair-minded approach—not to commit the *tu quoque* fallacy: “a form of *ad hominem* fallacy that occurs when it is assumed that an argument is wrong if the source making the claim has itself spoken or acted in a way inconsistent with it. The fallacy focuses on the perceived hypocrisy of the opponent rather than the merits of their argument.” “Tu Quoque,” RationalWiki, accessed January 28, 2022, [https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Tu\\_quoque](https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Tu_quoque).

<sup>2</sup> It may be helpful for readers to imagine, e.g., the dishonesty objection being made *after* all other apologetic arguments have been offered—after all other objections to Christianity have been answered.

offered have broader implications for apologetics,<sup>3</sup> this thesis is not a rejection of standard modes of apologetics. It is best understood as a *meta*-apologetic approach. Therefore, it is essential to take a moment to define the scope of this project in terms of what it is *not*.

### 2.1.1 *Not an Exercise in Positive Apologetics*

This thesis is not an attempt at *positive* apologetics, which offers evidence and arguments that the Christian faith is true. Instead, it employs *negative* apologetics: “refuting objections to the Christian faith.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, we must bracket the tantalizing matter of natural theology.<sup>5</sup> The task at hand is not to prove that God exists, that theological knowledge is real, or even that Christians are not, in fact, deluded or deceived—but to show what is wrong with the dishonesty objection: a *de jure* response to a *de jure* objection.

The skeptic is not concerned whether “there are good arguments for the existence of God,” or whether “in light of the evidence it’s more probable than not that God exists,” or whether certain “arguments make it rational to believe that God exists.”<sup>6</sup> Even if these points were granted, how can the believer move beyond a tentative, more-probable-than-not stance to holding the Christian faith as so final and authoritative that she is justified in preaching it?

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<sup>3</sup> See especially chaps. 4, 5.

<sup>4</sup> William Lane Craig et al., *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan, Counterpoints: Bible and theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Natural theology may be defined as “the part of theology that does not depend on revelation,” but not everyone believes that revelation-independent knowledge of God is possible. “What Is Natural Theology?,” The Gifford Lectures, last modified September 8, 2014, accessed December 1, 2022, <https://www.giffordlectures.org/overview/natural-theology>.

Benefiting from voices that differ on natural theology (e.g., both Karl Barth and William Lane Craig), I plan to offer a response that may be useful regardless of one’s position: that those who accept natural theology may say why they need not remain provisional in their commitment to Christ, and that those who reject natural theology might gain a greater appreciation for the service that negative, nuanced, and careful apologetics can offer. One way of describing my intent is that it is to investigate whether the believer needs to be intellectually open (provisional) about whether any *natural anti-theology* might someday succeed.

<sup>6</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 189.

### 2.1.2 *Not a Search for Warrant*

Although Plantinga's work will be helpful for this thesis, his work is not aimed at answering the dishonesty objection. He argues that *if* Christianity is true, then Christian belief is epistemologically *warranted*—that is, it qualifies as bona fide knowledge.<sup>7</sup> However, the skeptic is not concerned with whether Christian belief *would* count as knowledge if it *were* true. Instead, he finds it intellectually dishonest for the Christian to hold her beliefs in a final, non-provisional manner, preaching to others *today* with confidence that no sufficiently contrary evidence or arguments—what Plantinga calls “defeaters”—will change her mind *tomorrow*. Intellectual honesty requires being open to the possibility that one is wrong.

### 2.1.3 *Neither a Presuppositional nor Evidentialist Apologetic*

At certain points, readers may wonder whether I am engaging in *presuppositional* apologetics, which “emphasizes special revelation as the starting point for apologetics,” insisting that “both parties in an apologetic encounter must assume that biblical revelation gives the only framework” within which “people can correctly interpret evidence.”<sup>8</sup> However, I do not ask the skeptic to assume that the Bible is true or insist that he cannot use his reasoning capacities otherwise. Rather, I argue that *to evaluate the Christian's intellectual honesty fairly, the skeptic must attempt to see things from her point of view*—which, at least for the sake of argument, requires handling the concept of revelation coherently, charitably, and hospitably.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*.

<sup>8</sup> David K. Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics: A Person-Centered Approach to Christian Defense* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 104–5.

<sup>9</sup> This thesis takes *revelation* to refer to the entire speech-act of God toward humanity. Most centrally, it relates to Jesus Christ as the Incarnate God-Man. It includes Jesus' life and teachings, God's work through the people of Israel before Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the universal Church. This thesis also takes it as given that revelation also properly applies to the apostolic tradition, the Rule of Faith of the early church, and biblical inspiration (understanding God to be active in the writing, editing, and canonization of Scripture). Two works that have informed me on these matters are Craig D. Allert, *A High View of Scripture? The Authority of the Bible and the*

Neither do I mean to reject *evidentialist* apologetics, which “stresses the accumulation of biblical and historical evidence,” using “an array of facts ... to defend the central claims of Christianity.”<sup>10</sup> The nature of the dishonesty objection is such that the response required is perhaps more toward the presuppositional end of things, but this should not be taken to imply that I disparage evidentialist apologetics.<sup>11</sup>

#### 2.1.4 *Not the Only Possible Response*

Finally, this thesis is but one possible response to the dishonesty objection. Different apologetic answers to this challenge could be made from different understandings of science, philosophy, epistemology, and theology. Different Christian answers are likely possible from other Protestant perspectives and Catholic and Orthodox ones. It might well be possible for thinkers from other religious traditions to ably address this objection.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2 What Is Intellectual Dishonesty?

Typically, apologetic exchanges rely on common ground between the Christian apologist and her conversation partner. Suppose the issue is whether the Bible has been translated or copied too often to be reliable. In that case, there is clear, relatively objective common ground to which both parties can appeal: ancient manuscripts, early quotations, textual criticism, etc. If the challenge comes from philosophy, such as the Euthyphro dilemma, again, a large set of

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*Formation of the New Testament Canon*, Evangelical Ressourcement (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007); Daniel H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics*, 106.

<sup>11</sup> Two of my favourite apologetic arguments are of an evidentialist flavour: First, the “Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism” in Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (New York: Oxford University, 2011), chap. 10; Second, an argument for historical reliability because the frequency of names in the Gospels matches the frequency of names found on gravestones from that time (which, e.g., would be extremely difficult to get right if the Gospels were written centuries later). Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> The subject of other religions is addressed in § 5.1.2.

overlapping assumptions, rules, modes of thinking, etc., is shared by both parties. In the case of the dishonesty objection, however, identifying common ground is part of the challenge itself.

The core of the dishonesty objection is that science meets a universal standard that the Christian faith fails to meet: a failure termed *intellectual dishonesty*. In one sense, this entire thesis is an argument about defining this term in the context of the Christian faith. At the same time, it seems impossible to respond unless both parties agree on essential terms. Nonetheless, we must seek as much agreement as possible. As the following sections will show, there is cause for both agreement and disagreement between regarding intellectual dishonesty.

### 2.2.1 *Agreement: An Abstract Definition*

At least in regular parlance, the Christian and the skeptic can agree on what it means to be intellectually dishonest: *being utterly closed to correction, embracing self-defence over self-criticism, employing non-falsifiable claims while feigning falsifiability, and claiming final certainty beyond what any evidence can justify*. Again, the Bible teaches Christians to listen to both sides of a matter,<sup>13</sup> not to be more critical of others than of themselves.<sup>14</sup> Christians are admonished against being “wise in [their] own eyes,”<sup>15</sup> hating correction,<sup>16</sup> having an inflated sense of their own understanding,<sup>17</sup> deceiving others,<sup>18</sup> and using dishonest scales.<sup>19</sup>

With an accuracy perhaps chilling to Christians and skeptics alike, the Scripture describes a time when people will cherry-pick teachers to confirm their own biases: they “will not put up

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<sup>13</sup> Prov. 18:13, 17. Verse 13 “is not to be limited specifically to a judicial hearing. It is much more general, and it is in line with the talkativeness of a fool. ... Typically the fool does not listen to others and hence is not in real dialogue; he insists only on personal views.” Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker, Word Biblical Commentary 22 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 136.

<sup>14</sup> Matt. 7:1-5; Luke 6:41; Rom. 2:1-11.

<sup>15</sup> Prov. 3:7, 12:15, 14:12, 21:2, 26:12; Isa. 5:21.

<sup>16</sup> Prov. 12:1.

<sup>17</sup> Prov. 3:5.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., Exod. 20:16; Prov. 14:5, 12:22.

<sup>19</sup> Prov. 11:1, 20:10, 20:23; Mic. 6:11. This might reasonably include *intellectual* scales.

with sound teaching, but ... will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.”<sup>20</sup> The words “intellectual dishonesty” do not appear in the Bible. Still, the Christian and the skeptic can agree on what it means to be intellectually honest—just as they can often agree about what regular honesty is.

### 2.2.1.1 General Honesty and Dishonesty

In general, *honesty* is “the quality of being fair and truthful,” “adherence to the facts,” and “fairness and straightforwardness of conduct.”<sup>21</sup> An honest action is “done with good intentions even if unsuccessful or misguided.”<sup>22</sup> *General dishonesty* (or *plain dishonesty*) is the opposite or “lack of honesty or integrity”: a “disposition to defraud or deceive.”<sup>23</sup>

Importantly, *honesty is a function of one’s intentions regarding what one believes to be true*; it is unrelated to being correct. A victim who misremembers the eye colour of her mugger is honest but wrong: a policeman who plants evidence against a guilty party is correct but dishonest. In common parlance, a person certainly tells a *lie* if they “make an untrue statement with intent to deceive” or “create a false or misleading impression.”<sup>24</sup> Yet it is also possible to ‘lie’ by either stating something false by accident—“Oops, I lied”—or on purpose but without intent to deceive: “Oh, I’ve *definitely* never procrastinated on my thesis. I’d *never* do that.”

Therefore, for the sake of brevity, let us understand *lying* to mean the intentionally deceptive sort

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<sup>20</sup> 2 Tim. 4:3-4 (NRSVUE). Paul is talking about people who will reject the gospel, but the method of rejection is intellectually dishonest: “Rather than hearing one correct teacher, they build a wall of teachers as if the sheer number of teachers will make them right. What they really want is to have their itching ears tickled with the latest doctrinal fad.” William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker, Word Biblical Commentary 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 574.

<sup>21</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. “honesty,” accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/honesty>.

<sup>22</sup> *Lexico*, s.v. “honesty,” accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/honest>.

<sup>23</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. “dishonesty,” accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dishonesty>.

<sup>24</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. “lie,” accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lie>.

of lying; let's take "to state something false" as an abbreviated form of "to state something *one believes to be false*;" and let's take "knows to be false" as equivalent to "*believes to be false*."

Philosopher Alex Barber describes three categories of dishonesty, as depicted in figure 2-

1. The most restrictive category is *lying*: directly stating something false. *Communicative dishonesty* occurs when the subject expresses a falsehood by verbally hiding, downplaying, or otherwise intimating something false. It manifests in various forms—outright lying, obstructing the truth, muddying the waters, etc.—but it is always an intentional, communicative act, "intended to cause or sustain false belief."<sup>25</sup> Communicative dishonesty is not merely deceptive; it is an "abuse of linguistic exchange":<sup>26</sup>

Theft is an objectionable method for transferring effective ownership because it violates a norm without which the social practice of ownership would be impossible, namely, the norm that property transfer requires permission. ... Knowingly expressing a falsehood involves the abuse of communication, the social practice whereby we openly display communicative intentions to our fellow beings.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Alex Barber, "Lying, Misleading, and Dishonesty," *The Journal of Ethics* 24, no. 2 (June 2020): 141. There is a debate in moral philosophy about whether lying is distinctly worse than merely misleading. For this paper, I am adopting Barber's view that "Our focus instead should be on the boundary between what is and is not expressed in a communicative act, irrespective of whether it is actually said." Note that whereas Barber abbreviates "communicative dishonesty" as "dishonesty" in his paper, I am using "dishonesty" to refer to the larger category of "general dishonesty," which includes communicative dishonesty along with non-communicative attempts to deceive. It is also important to note that Barber's claim "is not that [communicative] dishonesty is *worse* than mere attempted deception. Sometimes it will be worse, sometimes it will be comparatively trivial. The claim, rather, is just that [communicative] dishonesty's wrongness is distinctive." "Lying, Misleading, and Dishonesty," 157.

<sup>26</sup> Barber, "Lying, Misleading, and Dishonesty," 152.

<sup>27</sup> Barber, "Lying, Misleading, and Dishonesty," 157.

Most generally, *attempting to deceive* (or general dishonesty) “[*seeks*] to cause someone to believe that *p* when one knows *p* to be untrue.”<sup>28</sup> This consists of all cases where the subject acts with the intention that another person will draw or maintain a false conclusion, including lying, communicative dishonesty, and non-verbal deception.<sup>29</sup>

As an example, Barber offers three different methods by which subject *x* might

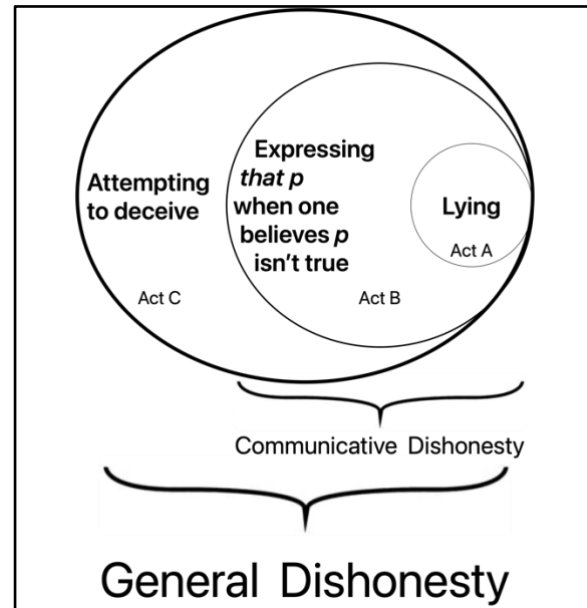


Figure 2-1. Categories of dishonesty.

attempt to deceive his neighbour *y* into concluding that there are foxes in their neighbourhood:

Act A: *x* utters ‘We have foxes. I saw them last night.’

Act B: *x* utters ‘I never realised we have foxes.’

Act C: *x* pulls *y*’s rubbish from *y*’s bin in the night and scatters it over *y*’s lawn.<sup>30</sup>

A is lying, B is misleading, and C is a non-expressive attempt to deceive. Using false balances or counterfeit currency are also examples of non-expressive dishonesty: seeking to cause someone to believe something false without abusing social conventions of linguistic exchange.

### 2.2.1.2 Intellectual Honesty

*Intellectual honesty* is related to plain honesty but specifically applies to situations in which “subtleties of presentation or reasoning are in play”:<sup>31</sup> “honesty in the acquisition,

<sup>28</sup> Barber, “Lying, Misleading, and Dishonesty,” 153.

<sup>29</sup> Barber notes that it is technically possible to ‘lie’ without intent to deceive, but this is not important for our analysis here. “Imagine a conversation with someone who is oddly sceptical towards everything you say. For amusement you say you are a lighthouse keeper. You have no intention to trick your interlocuter into believing this as you know you will be disbelieved, yet it is natural to describe you as having decided to lie.” “Lying, Misleading, and Dishonesty,” 145.

<sup>30</sup> Barber, “Lying, Misleading, and Dishonesty,” 153.

<sup>31</sup> Louis M. Guenin, “Intellectual Honesty,” *Synthese* 145, no. 2 (2005): 218–19.

analysis, and transmission of ideas.”<sup>32</sup> For Harvard ethics lecturer Louis M. Guenin, “the kernel of *intellectual honesty* consists in a disposition of an agent such that when presented with an incentive to deceive in any way,” she will not.<sup>33</sup> Despite “contrary incentives,” an intellectually honest person “refuses ... to gain an unfair advantage” for her preferred view of things; she will neither “indulge laziness” by glossing over problems in her position nor exaggerate.<sup>34</sup>

An intellectually honest person does not dodge the question, shade the truth, walk crookedly, assert on the basis of wishful thinking, or throw an inquirer off the scent. An intellectually honest person may draw fine distinctions, but will not float [an intentionally convoluted] distinction that might mislead. ... [They will] avoid any nuance, emphasis, inclusion, or neglect that might mislead. An opponent’s position will be reported in the strongest form that the opponent has articulated. Settings do arise in which one may keep one’s own counsel, but the intellectually honest person will not do so if that would mislead.<sup>35</sup>

### 2.2.1.3 Intellectual Dishonesty

*Intellectual dishonesty* is the opposite: “a disposition to mislead when talking seriously” and choosing a contrary incentive over truthfulness.<sup>36</sup> It should not be confused with *academic dishonesty*, which refers to fraudulent forms of academic conduct.<sup>37</sup> Similar to plain honesty, it is possible to be intellectually honest but wrong, or correct but intellectually dishonest.

Intellectual dishonesty may seem to be a subcategory of general dishonesty; that is, dishonesty *about* “the acquisition, analysis, and transmission of ideas.”<sup>38</sup> However, recalling the skeptic’s objections, the Christian faith is accused of being utterly closed to correction, embracing self-defence over self-criticism, employing non-falsifiable claims while feigning

<sup>32</sup> RationalWiki, “Intellectual Honesty.”

<sup>33</sup> Guenin, “Intellectual Honesty,” 217.

<sup>34</sup> Guenin, “Intellectual Honesty,” 218.

<sup>35</sup> Guenin, “Intellectual Honesty,” 220.

<sup>36</sup> Guenin, “Intellectual Honesty,” 218.

<sup>37</sup> E.g., cheating and plagiarism. “Academic Dishonesty Definition and Types,” Northern Illinois University, accessed December 8, 2022, <https://www.niu.edu/academic-integrity/faculty/types/index.shtml>.

<sup>38</sup> RationalWiki, “Intellectual Honesty.”

falsifiability, and claiming final certainty beyond what any evidence can justify. Given that “intellectually dishonest” colloquially applies to these activities, further analysis is required.

For Barber, theft is wrong because it violates social norms for ownership, and communicative dishonesty is distinctly wrong apart from mere deception (which is also wrong) because it violates social norms for communication.<sup>39</sup> Drawing on Guenin’s phrasing, I submit that intellectual dishonesty is wrong because it violates social norms pertaining to subtleties of reasoning and presentation<sup>40</sup>—norms pertaining to the honest pursuit of truth. In other words, whereas communicative dishonesty is an abuse of language, intellectual dishonesty is an abuse of subtleties of reasoning and presentation.

#### 2.2.1.4 Strong Intellectual Dishonesty

Let us further distinguish between *strong* and *weak* forms of intellectual dishonesty. *Strong intellectual dishonesty* (SID) holds only if the subject intentionally meddles with the presentation of evidence, reason, etc., to hide, downplay, or draw attention away from inconvenient truths. E.g., tobacco companies paid a group of ethically compromised scientists to suppress the truth about tobacco-related health risks for decades, and something similar happens with climate science today.<sup>41</sup> SID includes non-verbal attempts to deceive, verbally misleading, sophistry, and lying—everything grouped under “general dishonesty” above—so long as the deception plays on subtleties of reason for the sake of causing or sustaining *false* belief.

The dishonesty objection is not concerned with this strong form of intellectual dishonesty. While one could accuse all Christian thinkers and leaders of being intentionally deceptive about the faith, this accusation would not trouble many Christians. It is trivially true

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<sup>39</sup> Barber, “Lying, Misleading, and Dishonesty,” 157.

<sup>40</sup> Guenin, “Intellectual Honesty,” 218–19.

<sup>41</sup> Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*.

that there are dishonest people—scientists and Christians alike—who, *at their worst*, attempt to deceive others. The matter at hand concerns whether the Christian faith participates in, or even depends upon, a weaker, more subtle form of intellectual dishonesty *at its best*.

### 2.2.1.5 Weak Intellectual Dishonesty

Weak intellectual dishonesty (WID) tries to induce or sustain a *true* belief in others—a belief that the subject himself takes to be true. WID is more serious than being misguided or ignorant: it holds when the subject has a responsibility to pursue the truth in some manner but fails to do so—a failure to appropriately seek the truth when presented with a contrary incentive. The incentive might be sustaining one’s career, personal pride in being right, laziness, preventing (perceived) weaker minds from being ‘led astray’ by nuance and hard questions, or even the fear of discovering that the belief in question may turn out to be false. Whereas SID is fraudulent regarding subtleties of reason and presentation, WID is negligent in these matters.

Examples of WID include the following: a scientist dismisses a preponderance of new evidence because he is convinced that his theory cannot be wrong; a Biblical scholar, fully convinced that Moses penned the entire Pentateuch, straw-mans the (alternative) Documentary Hypothesis instead of carefully weighing the evidence and arguments for it in their strongest form; a public health official, rightly convinced that vaccines work, argues that vaccine mandates are warranted based on medical science alone, glossing over ethical-democratic questions; a Bible college instructor, sincerely convinced that the Bible is the Word of God, downplays legitimate questions raised by critical scholarship so as not to trouble her students.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> It would be one thing for this instructor to inform her students that there are legitimate, challenging questions about the Bible and Christianity that require a greater level of training and study than her Bible college presently offers—and that she retains her faith amid such questions. It is another thing to allow one’s students to graduate with the misleading, triumphalist impression that there simply are no legitimate, challenging questions out there.

### 2.2.1.6 Plain Dishonesty vs. Intellectual Dishonesty

Two further distinctions are needful. First, SID may occur in the two outermost circles of Figure 2-1 but not the centre. E.g., instead of spreading leaves to prompt false conclusions about wildlife, one might ‘arrange the intellectual furniture’ of a presentation, discussion, piece of writing, etc., so that the audience draws his desired, false conclusion—an attempt to deceive. Sometimes, SID may extend inward to the second circle—expressing a falsehood without directly stating it—but the deception must pivot on subtleties of reasoning and presentation. At the innermost circle—lying—the distinction between plain and intellectual dishonesty breaks down. One can lie *about* intellectual matters, such as the outcome of an experiment, but the mode of deception no longer depends on subtleties of reasoning and presentation.

Second, and more importantly for our discussion, WID occurs *outside* the largest circle in Figure 2-1: WID excludes all attempts to deceive (that would be SID). Therefore, weak intellectual dishonesty, with which the dishonesty objection is primarily concerned, is not considered dishonesty in everyday parlance, as shown in Figure 2-2.

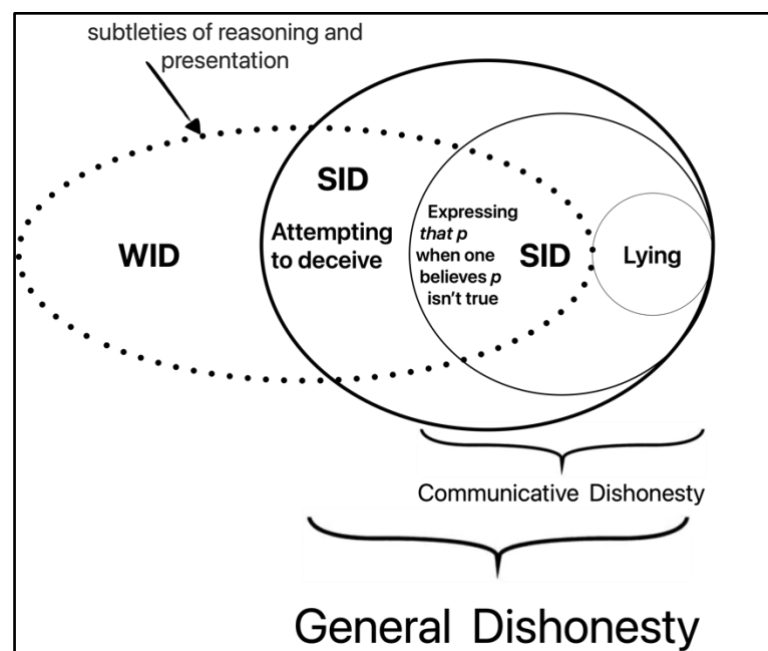


Figure 2-2. Weak intellectual dishonesty (WID) is not general dishonesty in common parlance. Strong intellectual dishonesty (SID) does qualify.

### 2.2.1.7 Notes on Intellectual Dishonesty

Since these matters are tied up with an individual's private intentions and beliefs about truth, identifying WID is not straightforward. An individual might simultaneously engage in WID, SID, and lying. From the outside, WID is perhaps impossible to distinguish from mere incompetence. E.g., an author sincerely advocating for a flat earth who presents a cherry-picked, misleading view of cosmology might be weakly intellectually dishonest. However, if he is unaware of the problems with his presentation, WID cannot hold. It seems the most we could say is that he is mistaken, incompetent, or deluded. When he is informed *and understands* his errors in reasoning or presentation, his level of responsibility increases: he must choose between WID and correcting his errors. Yet from an outside point of view, it remains possible that he has not understood the criticism or sincerely disbelieves it. At most, we can say that the more often he flatly dismisses criticism, the more likely he engages in WID.

### 2.2.2 *What the Skeptic Needs to Show*

Let us suppose that the Christian and the skeptic can agree on this articulation of weak intellectual dishonesty, hereafter abbreviated to "intellectual dishonesty." Suppose also that they both subscribe (enough, for the moment) to the correspondence theory of truth—that a statement is true if, and only if, it corresponds to reality.<sup>43</sup> It is thus non-controversial to suppose further that they agree on intellectual honesty as a universal obligation, or duty, toward reality.

Given such an agreement, the skeptic's path to success seems clear. First, he must identify the Christian's errors in handling evidence and reason. E.g., perhaps she has been

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<sup>43</sup> Due to space constraints, I will not discuss philosophical debates regarding theories of truth, postmodern skepticism, and the like in this paper. Even so, this is not to the detriment of my argument because critiques along the lines of the dishonesty objection often come from those who espouse scientism, which implies a modern correspondence theory of truth—although it is not always articulated as such.

claiming she is a Christian *because* of something erroneous, such as the (false) claim that “there is no scientific evidence whatever for evolution. The actual evidence is exactly what would be expected if God had created each kind of creature in the beginning.”<sup>44</sup>

Second, and crucially, the Christian must recognize that her duty toward the truth has increased due to her encounter with the skeptic, either because (a) she sees that she has made an error or (b) she suspects that she *might* have made an error. Suppose, instead, she genuinely fails to recognize anything worth attending to. In that case, she either (c) misunderstands or (d) has overriding beliefs that—erroneous or not—can account for the skeptic’s accusations: *perhaps the skeptic misunderstands; he would say anything to discredit Christianity*. Maybe everything she’s ever been taught gives her no reason to think evolution could be true. Unless she informs him, the skeptic cannot know whether he is dismissed for good or bad reasons. Regardless, if the Christian does not perceive herself as more responsible for investigating things than before, she cannot be intellectually dishonest—even if some of her thinking is wrong or deluded.

Third, therefore, the Christian must renege on her duty to the truth. To continue, let’s suppose a form of case (b) above: the Christian now fears that evolution might be true, which (for her) suggests her faith could be false. For intellectual dishonesty to hold, she must carry on as before without sufficiently increased attention to the matter. She knows she has failed her duty to the truth at some level, but she is so convinced that Christianity is true that she carries on unabated. At least for the moment, we could describe such a Christian as intellectually dishonest—at least about evolution and Christianity. However, she could satisfy her duty to the truth and retain her faith by reading a book like *Evolution: Scripture and Nature Say Yes*.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Morris, *The Long War against God*, 279.

<sup>45</sup> Denis O. Lamoureux, *Evolution: Scripture and Nature Say Yes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016). Alternatively, she could read a book that debunks evolution to her satisfaction: incorrect, but not dishonest.

Importantly, the dishonesty objection is not primarily concerned with intellectual dishonesty about science but about the Christian faith in general, especially relating to core matters of the Holy Spirit, revelation, and authority. Regarding these things, it is more complex for the skeptic to identify the errors the Christian allegedly makes.<sup>46</sup>

### 2.2.3 *Disagreement: A Tale of Two Realities*

Despite initial agreement on a definition for intellectual dishonesty as an obligation to reality, it is critically important to point out that the skeptic and the Christian strongly disagree about ultimate reality: they have radically different pictures of the universe we live in. Even with perfect agreement about the abstract features of this obligation, such an agreement can only go so far if the two parties cannot agree on what it looks like in practice.

#### 2.2.3.1 Thought Experiment: Two Soldiers

Defining a mutual duty to reality when the parties cannot agree about reality is difficult, to say the least. Such an impasse is not entirely unlike that faced by two opposing soldiers during the American War of Independence: The loyalist says, “You’re a traitor!” The patriot replies, “You’re an oppressor!” To some extent, each soldier might recognize important virtues at work in the other, such as respect for the rules of war, battlefield courage, or self-sacrifice; however, any mutual estimation of each other’s *loyalty to authority* will be quite different.

Quite apart from how intrinsically loyal each soldier may be in his personal life, the problem lies upstream, pivoting on disagreement about rightful authority in the first place. Unless one of them reconsiders the rightful authority over the Thirteen Colonies, he cannot begin

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<sup>46</sup> To use terminology I will introduce in § 2.6.3, it is comparatively easier to identify intellectual dishonesty when it relates to *investigational* authority (science) than when it deals with *revelational* authority (theology).

to approve of the other as being *properly* loyal. At most, he could say the other is a good soldier *for his side*—that he *would* be properly loyal if he only served the rightful authority.

### 2.2.3.2 What if Jesus *Is* the Truth?

The Christian and the skeptic face a far more difficult impasse. They do not disagree about human, governmental authority, but about ultimate authority;<sup>47</sup> ultimate reality; humanity's spiritual context, in which, for the Christian, all humans encounter spiritual forces—good and evil;<sup>48</sup> human sinfulness, self-deception,<sup>49</sup> and truth-suppression;<sup>50</sup> and the nature of truth itself. As theologian Donald G. Bloesch makes clear, for Christians, “truth is inseparable from grace,” “associated with obedience,” and linked “to what is humanizing and liberating.”<sup>51</sup> Truth is

both transformative and informative. Jesus claimed that he told the truth and that he bore witness to the truth (Jn 8:40, 45; 18:37). He was intimating not that his words were necessarily in conformity with external reality but that they presented an accurate picture of God's plan and purpose for human existence. His Jewish interrogators could not grasp what he was saying because they did not abide in the truth (8:43–47). To be in the truth means to abide in God; to be in error means to be separated from God.<sup>52</sup>

Crucially, the Christian believes Jesus *is* the truth.<sup>53</sup> “Truth is not so much an idea as a person, not so much a formulation as an act.”<sup>54</sup> The Christian agrees with the skeptic on

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<sup>47</sup> Matt. 28:18.

<sup>48</sup> John 16:8; Heb. 13:2; 1 Peter 5:8.

<sup>49</sup> Jer. 17:9.

<sup>50</sup> Rom. 1:18.

<sup>51</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration and Interpretation*, Christian Foundations 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 282, 293.

<sup>52</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 283.

<sup>53</sup> John 14:6. “In calling himself the truth,” one scholar argues, “Jesus is not giving an ontological definition in terms of transcendentals but is describing himself in terms of his mission to men.” Raymond Edward Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman, vol. A, The Anchor Bible 29 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 630. Others are more comfortable with an ontological claim: “Jesus is not only the way to God; he is the truth of God – how could he be otherwise, since he is the embodiment of God's self-revelation?” F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), 299. See also John 1:1–18.

Even if we take Jesus' statement in the weaker sense here, something like “I am the way of truth and life” (a reading rejected by Bruce), it would still mean that Jesus is centrally important to the Christian way of life, which would include the pursuit of truth, and therefore intellectual honesty. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, 299.

<sup>54</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 282.

the idea of truth as a correct description of the world, but the correspondence theory becomes questionable when the discussion turns to ultimate or final truth. Truth in the ultimate sense is not a conforming of the mind to objective reality but the refocusing of the mind by the Spirit of God, who breaks into our reality from the beyond. Truth is being brought into accord with the transcendent meaning of the gospel, the very Word of God. It is not simply an agreement between our ideas and the gospel but a conforming of our total life orientation to the demands of the gospel. Truth in biblical perspective is not so much the factual as the eventful. It is not the mere perception of facts but transformation by the transcendent reality that the biblical facts point to and attest.<sup>55</sup>

The Christian's duty to the truth cannot be understood coherently apart from her personal duty to the One who claimed to *be* the truth. All philosophical theories of truth

begin with a cognitive capacity within the human person, whether this be reason, feeling, experience, intuition or so on. Truth is what the human being can discover or conceive or imagine. In theology[,] truth is what God declares and reveals. Truth is not a human possibility but a divine actuality.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, *intellectual honesty* has a somewhat different meaning for the Christian.

The skeptic will not give any quarter to 'intellectual honesty' as a duty to Christ, but the Christian cannot coherently reject the notion. This is but one feature of a *problem of position* explored in this chapter, which obstructs common ground between the Christian and the skeptic.

Still, for the dishonesty objection to hold—as opposed to the mere accusation of delusion—the skeptic must provide more than a simple dismissal of these matters. He must show that the Christian faith—at its best and on its own terms—cannot be held apart from irresponsibly glossing over errors related to subtleties of reasoning and presentation. As things stand, it is far from clear that the dishonesty objection succeeds in this regard. In particular, the skeptic does not appear to be open to the Christian understanding of revelation as *revealed*.

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<sup>55</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 287. Bloesch follows Karl Barth, whose understanding of the "Word of God" is complex: it applies to the Bible, but it is not synonymous with "the Bible." For the scope of this thesis, Barth's "Word of God" can be applied to special revelation generally.

<sup>56</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 294.

### 2.3 Revelation as an Object of Knowledge

Critics of religion, such as Dawkins, do not accept “other ways of knowing besides the scientific,” objecting that it amounts to Christians defining themselves into an “epistemological Safe Zone,” immune from criticism.<sup>57</sup> Phrased that way, Christians might be within their rights to accuse the skeptic of strong scientism—wherein science is the *only* source of knowledge—and reply on that level alone.<sup>58</sup> However, adherence to strong scientism is not required for the skeptic to make the dishonesty objection. Let us suppose that the skeptic already agrees that it is self-referentially incoherent to state *that science is the only form of knowledge*—since that statement itself cannot be arrived at using science. Suppose he agrees that there are other ways of knowing apart from science, such as those appropriate to moral or philosophical truths.

Perhaps it is more appropriate to say that the skeptic adheres to a weak form of scientism, which considers science as merely the *best* source of truth:

Advocates of weak scientism allow for the existence of truths apart from science and are even willing to grant that they can have some minimal, positive rationality status without the support of science. But advocates of weak scientism still hold that science is the most valuable, most serious and most authoritative sector of human learning. Every other intellectual activity is inferior to science. Further, there are virtually no limits to science. There is no field into which scientific research cannot shed light. To the degree that some issue or belief outside science can be given scientific support or can be reduced to science, to that degree the issue or belief becomes rationally acceptable. Thus we have an intellectual and perhaps even a moral obligation to try to use science to solve problems in other fields that, heretofore, have been untouched by scientific methodology.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 183–84.

<sup>58</sup> “Strong scientism is the view that some proposition or theory is true and/or rational to believe if and only if it is a scientific proposition or theory; that is, if and only if it is a well-established scientific proposition or theory that, in turn, depends on its having been successfully formed, tested and used according to appropriate scientific methodology. There are no truths apart from scientific truths, and even if there were, there would be no reason whatever to believe them.” Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 347.

<sup>59</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 347.

The above is closer to the skeptic's position. However, let us also assume that the skeptic agrees that it is nonsensical for the conclusions of science to be considered more certain than the philosophical foundations that make science possible in the first place.<sup>60</sup>

A more charitable formulation of the skeptic's misgiving is as follows: science is not the best source—much less the only source—of knowledge in every sphere of human life; however, a comparison with science shows that the Christian's appeal to revelation is intellectually dishonest—insulating her faith from being corrected or falsified: “an impregnable fortress ... constructed around ... a ridiculous set of beliefs, rendering them immune to rational criticism and creating a veneer of faux reasonableness.”<sup>61</sup>

This thesis aims to show that the dishonesty objection fails, not to prove that Christian faith is falsifiable in some sense that the skeptic would find acceptable. There is no need to accept the skeptic's implication that only assailable things are true—or that one can only be intellectually honest toward falsifiable things. There are good reasons to think the opposite.

### 2.3.1 *God and Other Minds*

The core argument of Plantinga's *God, and Other Minds* is that “belief in other minds and belief in God are in the same epistemological boat; hence if either is rational, so is the other. But obviously the former *is* rational; so, therefore, is the latter.”<sup>62</sup> At first, this might appear to be a strange inclusion. The key is to try to inhabit the mindset of an *other-minds skeptic*, who finds

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<sup>60</sup> “Strong scientism rules out these presuppositions altogether because neither the presuppositions themselves nor their defense are scientific matters. Weak scientism misconstrues their strength in its view that scientific propositions have greater epistemic authority than those of other fields like philosophy. This would mean that the conclusions of science are more certain than the philosophical presuppositions used to justify and reach those conclusions, and that is absurd.” Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 348.

<sup>61</sup> Law, *Believing BS*, 11.

<sup>62</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1967), viii.

the existence of other minds—other real persons—apart from himself to be just as outlandish, or *doxastically distant*, as an atheist finds the existence of God to be. Rather than believing in other minds, an other-minds skeptic finds it easier to believe that other people are androids, holograms, or other illusions of personhood. Full *solipsism* denies the existence of *anything* apart from one's own mind—including nature. From the standpoint of epistemology, *theism is just as vulnerable to atheist criticism as realism is to solipsist criticism*.<sup>63</sup> As we will see below, merely drawing attention to such vulnerabilities is not enough to prove intellectual dishonesty.

### 2.3.1.1 Thought Experiment: Flowers on the Nightstand

Suppose you awaken and see a bouquet on your nightstand. You live alone, so you can hardly believe your eyes. In fact, you *actually* disbelieve your eyes, so you reach out with your hands to tell whether the flowers are there. But your disbelief is so strong that you don't trust your sense of touch either, similarly rejecting smell, taste, hearing, and the other, often-overlooked senses. Do any options remain? Is there any logical, noncircular way to regain trust in your experience if you flatly refuse to appeal to sensory input at all? No phone calls, video evidence, or explanations from a secret admirer will help, for such things rely on rejected senses. The only possible remedy is to take a leap of faith and trust one or more of your senses again.<sup>64</sup>

### 2.3.1.2 Thought Experiment: A Solipsist Disagrees with Himself

Furthermore, let us imagine Sam, a solipsist who believes that nothing exists apart from his own mind. As far as he is concerned, his realist friend Rae, a scientist, is merely a part of his

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<sup>63</sup> "Realism" has many possible meanings, but here I simply mean "belief in the natural, physical world"—an antonym of solipsism.

<sup>64</sup> This problem is inspired by the systematic doubt of René Descartes. See Gary Hatfield, "René Descartes," ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), accessed February 23, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/descartes/>.

consciousness. He accuses her (or the *Rae* part of himself) of being intellectually dishonest (as illusions go) because of her stubborn belief that the physical universe and about eight billion other minds are real. For Sam, sensory input—much less empirical science—is not valid for knowing anything at all. At best, such ‘input’ merely provides a way to know his own mind via some self-generated illusion.

What can Rae say to him? Any appeal she makes to experience is rejected because it is not a valid way of knowing. Any valid form of knowledge, Sam insists, must originate in the mind alone; it cannot be dependent on any ‘experience’ with the so-called “external world.” He argues (with himself) that if there *were* an external world, he would be able to prove it using purely philosophical methods; he wouldn’t need to rely on faith.

For Sam, Rae is a manifestation of his own loneliness, tempting him to *pretend to know what he doesn’t know* and could never know. To avoid the pitfalls of faith and confirmation bias, he must not allow ‘intellectually dishonest’ assumptions in the door. Besides, the supposed ‘external world’ is far too disorderly and chaotic to be real—it is clearly an illusion. A *real* external world would conform far better to the ideal forms of the mind.<sup>65</sup>

Here Rae accuses Sam of foisting an inappropriate epistemology on the external world—assuming that the mind is the only source of knowledge. He responds that she is simply defining a whole imaginary universe into an epistemological safe zone: her belief in the external world is unassailable—utterly immune to any evidence or argument he presents.

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<sup>65</sup> Here, Sam espouses views like those of some ancient Greek philosophers. Although they did not necessarily embrace solipsism, philosophers following Plato did place the material realm at a lower level of credibility than the *ideal realm*—the divine, transcendent world and realm of the soul (the rational, intellectual part of each human), accessible only by reason and more real than the material world. The material, sensible world was considered “a perpetual Heraclitean flow of ever-changing appearances of which no real knowledge is possible,” so only thinking that has to do with the realm of ideas, or Forms, “attains truth.” A. H. Armstrong, *An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (London: University Paperbacks, 1957), 37.

Sam finds Rae's science intellectually dishonest, but it is unclear that he has grounds for the accusation. For Rae to be guilty of intellectual dishonesty, she must knowingly meddle with subtleties of reasoning and presentation when making her case to Sam (or herself). Otherwise, she is at most deluded (from Sam's point of view). It seems fairer to say that there is an epistemological gap between them—a problem of position.

### 2.3.1.3 Objections Roundup 1

These thought experiments apply to several of the skeptic's objections. First, there is an upper verification limit for any way of knowing, including science; ultimately, all ways of knowing depend on encounters that the human knower cannot get behind, verify, or 'check up on.' A geologist can investigate sedimentary formation, planetary formation, and how gravity and cosmic inflation work, but he must finally accept his encounter with the universe as it is. A woman can get to know a man by sharing experiences and conversation, but she cannot verify that he is another mind apart from her own; she simply accepts it, and their relationship occurs downstream. The acceptance of both the universe and other minds is unassailable: "an axiom, not the end product of a process of reasoning"<sup>66</sup>—despite Dawkins's aversion.

Second, it is always possible that an extreme skeptic might find these upper limits suspicious, but the fact that there are such limits does not tell us one way, or the other, whether a given way of knowing has a real *object*.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, for the charge of intellectual dishonesty to hold, it is not enough to merely question the object's reality or point out its epistemological limits—for such limits apply to every way of knowing, regardless of legitimacy.

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<sup>66</sup> Pace Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 319.

<sup>67</sup> Where "object" is used in the epistemological sense: the thing that a given way of knowing is attempting to know.

### 2.3.2 *The Nature-Revelation Analogy*

Taking the above together with Plantinga's argument about God and other minds, we may argue that Christian faith is another legitimate way of knowing, taking divine revelation as its object. The fact that the skeptic does not appreciate it need not trouble the Christian any more than a solipsist should trouble a scientist. Every way of knowing, including science, can be criticized by a sufficiently skeptical person. Let us refer to this apologetic approach of setting up an analogy between the external world and divine revelation as the *nature-revelation analogy*.

#### 2.3.2.1 Objection: Going Nuclear

Stephen Law labels such an apologetic approach as "Going Nuclear"—"an attempt to unleash an argument that lays waste to every position, bringing them all down to the same level of 'reasonableness.'"<sup>68</sup> He groups the nature-revelation analogy with skepticism about all reason in general, which he calls "a wonderful get-out-of-jail-free card. It allows [the theist] to walk away ..., saying, 'So you see? In the last analysis, our beliefs are *equally* (ir)rational! They're *both* 'faith positions!'"<sup>69</sup> For Law, this is a bad tactic because

it's almost certainly an intellectually dishonest ruse. Those who press the nuclear button rarely do so in good faith. Bear in mind that, in such discussions, playing the skeptical card really is the nuclear option. By *Going Nuclear*, [the theist] avoids defeat, but *only by utterly annihilating the rationality of every belief*. All positions, no matter how sensible or nuts, come out as equally (ir)rational.<sup>70</sup>

Going nuclear, says Law, can make belief in fairies appear reasonable. To be consistent, the theist must accept all manner of ridiculous positions as equally (un)reasonable.

As a last-ditch strategy [the theist] may try this: she may admit that her own belief involves a leap of faith, but then add that her atheist opponents make a similar leap of faith when it comes to *trusting their senses*. ...

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<sup>68</sup> Law, *Believing BS*, 97.

<sup>69</sup> Law, *Believing BS*, 99.

<sup>70</sup> Law, *Believing BS*, 100.

... Having set up this skeptical argument, our Theist may then add that she happens to enjoy not only *sensory experiences* but also a *God experience*. God, she supposes, reveals himself to her. ...

... Belief in God need be no more a faith position than the atheist's belief in the external world. The two beliefs are actually intellectually on par. *It's leaps of faith all round.*<sup>71</sup>

For Law, it is not enough to assert that God is in the same epistemological boat as other minds or the natural world. Since it is trivially true that every way of knowing has its limits and detractors, this does not accrue to the credibility of theism. "Even if any belief about the external world involves a leap of faith," Law argues, "it does *not* follow that it's as reasonable for Theists to place their trust in their God experience as it is for atheists to trust their senses."<sup>72</sup> Unlike belief in the natural world—a nearly-universal human belief—many religious people worldwide have conflicting religious experiences; moreover, in Law's view, there is too much suffering in the world to believe in an all-loving, all-powerful God.<sup>73</sup>

### 2.3.2.2 Response: A More Modest Claim

There is much to say in response to Law. First, while it might not be fair to accuse Law of straw-manning our analogy, the fact that he unnecessarily aligns it so closely with irrationality exemplifies that common ground between the Christian and the skeptic is in short supply. If the skeptic will not entertain the possibility of divine revelation—immediately identifying openness toward it with gross irrationality—it is difficult to see how any progress can be made. To be just as intellectually open and honest as he expects the Christian to be, the skeptic must be willing to consider possibilities that are doxastically distant from him, such as the possibility that Christianity is a legitimate way of knowing a real object.

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<sup>71</sup> Law, *Believing BS*, 101–2.

<sup>72</sup> Law, *Believing BS*, 103.

<sup>73</sup> It is beyond our scope to respond to the Problem of Evil, but many apologists, including Plantinga, have written about it at length. E.g., Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1977).

Second, I do not present the nature-revelation analogy to argue that theism is *equally* well-supported or credible as belief in the external world.<sup>74</sup> I present the analogy to support a far more modest claim: *it is not intellectually dishonest for the Christian to accept revelation as an object of knowledge*. In fact, the point of making the nature-revelation analogy is the difference in credibility between the two: to utilize something common to the skeptic and the Christian—acceptance of one’s encounter with the external world, on which science depends—to address something controversial between them: openness to revelation, on which Christian faith depends.

Third, comparisons between God and fairies fail to appreciate the Christian view of divine revelation. The skeptic expects the Christian to recognize the difference in face-value credibility between the external world and God as understood by an average, non-religious Western person; it is only fair that he would recognize the difference in face-value credibility between God and fairies. The skeptic would not write serious books on non-belief in fairies or attend a public debate on whether fairies exist—except perhaps to lampoon theism.

The nature-revelation analogy is not a retreat to irrationality but a modest insistence on putting the matter at hand in perspective: any charge of intellectual dishonesty that relies on epistemological vulnerabilities common to science and Christianity must apply to both. Since it is trivially true that every way of knowing has its limits and detractors, this fact neither supports nor undermines the credibility of theism. The skeptic may believe that the Christian faith is not a legitimate way of knowing. Still, he should recognize that his assertion that divine revelation is impossible says nothing one way or the other about the Christian’s intellectual honesty.

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<sup>74</sup> To be clear, if an apologist did make such a claim, then Law’s arguments about Going Nuclear might apply.

### 2.3.3 *Christian Faith as Dependent on the Transcendent*

#### 2.3.3.1 *A kata-physin Approach*

Christian thinkers have attended to science and theology as ways of knowing. Karl Barth, considered to be the most important theologian of the twentieth century, refers to theology as a “science,” where a “science” is any study that seeks “to apprehend a specific *object* and its environment in the manner *directed* by the phenomenon itself.”<sup>75</sup> Theologian Thomas F. Torrance develops Barth’s thinking further. Surveying Alexandrian theologians from the second to the fifth centuries—especially John Philoponos—Torrance holds that “Christian thinkers laid the foundations upon which all subsequent empirical and theoretical science has developed.”<sup>76</sup> Contrary to the largely anti-empirical views of Greek philosophy,<sup>77</sup> the Incarnation led them to understand “space and time as *contingent*.”<sup>78</sup> The fact that something genuinely new had entered history—something that could never have been arrived at by pure reason—suggested that empirical engagement was necessary:

this called for a process of positive questioning of realities or framing of thought experiments designed to let their actual nature to disclose itself — a method which became known as “kataphysic” or “dogmatic science”, that is a science in which thinking and knowing are positively governed by the objective nature or reality of things, operate

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<sup>75</sup> Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963), 3.

<sup>76</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological and Natural Science* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 5. Readers should note, however, that it is inaccurate to suggest, as apologists sometimes do, that all modern science owes its existence to the Judeo-Christian worldview and could not have possibly come about any other way (and Torrance is not making that strong of a claim here). Still, it is also inaccurate to say that the medieval church suppressed the growth of science, as atheists sometimes suggest. See Ronald L. Numbers, ed., *Galileo Goes to Jail: And Other Myths about Science and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2009), chaps. 2, 9.

<sup>77</sup> “It was his distinctively Christian understanding of creation that had opened up for Philoponos the possibility of a genuinely scientific account of the world of space and time, freeing it from the philosophical myths of the Greeks. Here also we see that it was his theological understanding of the contingent rational order of the universe of space and time free from necessity that provided him with access to the actual nature of the universe, and helped him to put forward a genuine scientific understanding of the empirical laws of its order.” Torrance, *Theological and Natural Science*, 86.

<sup>78</sup> Torrance, *Theological and Natural Science*, 6.

holistically rather than analytically, and develop a modality of the reason that is appropriate to the specific nature of the object.<sup>79</sup>

*Kata physin* is Greek for “according to [the] nature” [of the thing studied]. A *kata-physin* approach requires one to “apprehend a specific *object* ... in the manner *directed* by [that object].”<sup>80</sup> This “modality of reason”—way of knowing—determines “how we know [the object], think about it, formulate knowledge of it, and how we verify that knowledge.”<sup>81</sup> The modality of reason appropriate for knowing an impersonal object, e.g., a rock, differs from that appropriate for another person: “with a person we are not in a position to exercise control over him or her as the object of knowing—a human being is personally other than we are, and is more profoundly objective ..., for a person would object to our attempts to control him or her.”<sup>82</sup> It would be improper to attempt to know another person by studying only his body or brain: the appropriate modality of reason for a person is *relationship*—not that of physical science.

Applied to knowing God, the *kata-physin* principle necessitates “a radical change in our knowing of him in accordance with his divine nature as the Lord God the Creator of our being: we cannot objectify him in the same way.”<sup>83</sup> An “*epistemological inversion*” occurs here, dependent on “his self-revelation and grace”: “we can know him ... only in the mode of worship, prayer, and adoration in which we respond personally, humbly, and obediently to his divine initiative.”<sup>84</sup> In short, humanity can only possibly know God *as creatures getting to know their Creator*, who reveals himself to them as he sees fit; in Barth’s terms, “knowledge of God is obedience to God. ... It is an act of human decision corresponding to the act of divine decision.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Torrance, *Theological and Natural Science*, 121.

<sup>80</sup> Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 3.

<sup>81</sup> Torrance, *Theological and Natural Science*, 92.

<sup>82</sup> Torrance, *Theological and Natural Science*, 92.

<sup>83</sup> Torrance, *Theological and Natural Science*, 92.

<sup>84</sup> Torrance, *Theological and Natural Science*, 92.

<sup>85</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, study ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2004), II/1:26.

## 2.3.3.2 Knowledge as Dependent

One important corollary of this *kata-physin* understanding is that all knowledge *depends* on its own object. The object of science is nature—that which cannot be gotten behind or corrected.<sup>86</sup> For a relationship, the object is another person, and there is already an epistemological shift: the knower is also known. In both cases, knowledge is *dependent*. There is no empirical science independent of nature and no relationship independent of another person. Crucially, any theological knowledge worthy of the name depends on God—on revelation.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> The reader may object that logical and mathematical truths are ‘beyond nature’ and can correct science. This thesis has no space to explore where philosophy should fit in with all this entirely, but it raises many questions. Do the laws of logic and mathematics constitute an ultimate object beyond nature? Would it be better to say they are the non-negotiable ground of all knowing projects? It seems incorrect to think that philosophical truths are proximate objects *under* nature—for the laws of logic also apply when knowing persons and even God. It is also suspect to conceive of philosophy as a super-ultimate object *above* nature and revelation—especially since philosophy has at times discouraged the pursuit of nature and revelation as legitimate objects of knowledge.

First, there is nothing *necessary* in math or logic to discourage science or theology—only philosophical *assumptions*. As for whether mathematics exists as an object of knowledge, Torrance’s discussion of Gödel, Einstein, and others suggests that mathematics cannot be self-contained; it must have a transcendent ground: “Modern science devoted to the investigation of empirical phenomena could not have arisen in the classical form given to it by Galileo and Newton if it had been restricted to a purely *a priori* approach. It arose out of the way of understanding of the universe as created by God and endowed by him with a created or contingent rationality of its own dependent upon his transcendent rationality.” Torrance, *Theological and Natural Science*, 39.

For our purposes, let us agree with William Lane Craig that *abstract objects* (a philosophical term) such as mathematical and logical truths must not be considered uncreated or co-eternal with God. *God and Abstract Objects: The Coherence of Theism; Aseity* (New York: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2017). If they can be said to exist in any sense (Craig thinks not), it will be a sense that depends on God. Regardless, since adherence to logical and mathematical truths permeates all valid ways of human knowing, we can say that this is built into the act of knowing any object—proximate or ultimate. Therefore, this matter need not detain us further.

<sup>87</sup> Although *special revelation* (direct revelation in Christ, Scripture, etc.) is most naturally in view here, one could understand *general revelation* (God’s self-disclosure in creation) to be the outworking of an act of God. A *theology of nature* (drawing conclusions about God from nature, *having already recognized nature as his creation*) also epistemologically depends on God. *Natural theology*, which generally tries to work from a ‘neutral,’ non-theistic understanding of nature to prove the existence of God, does *attempt* independent knowledge of God.

As mentioned earlier, it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage this matter. Whether or not natural theology is possible has no bearing on the dishonesty objection: if it is possible, we can yet consider it an act of grace on God’s part—accommodating himself to those who seek him—and so not technically independent after all. “If we choose to speak of other revelations besides the one great revelation in Jesus Christ, then they must be conceived as being subordinate to and dependent on God’s self-revelation in Christ” Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology*, Christian Foundations 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 163.

What the Christian cannot coherently entertain is the idea of an ontologically neutral arena from which to launch the project of natural theology. Either the Holy Spirit is present or not; either the Christian is regenerated or not. There might be an *intellectually* neutral space into which the Christian might retreat to conduct natural theology, but if Christianity is true, there cannot be an *ontologically* neutral space; therefore, she cannot have certainty that she

We may extend this train of thought and group objects of knowledge into two types.

*Proximate* objects, such as rocks and trees, are proper objects of knowledge, but not ultimate: one *can* ‘get behind’ them and submit their ways of knowing to other, more fundamental objects and ways of knowing. Geology, e.g., might be understood as a combination of sciences such as chemistry and thermodynamics, which can be grouped under physics, and so on.<sup>88</sup>

*Ultimate* objects are the end of the line, epistemologically speaking. There is nothing higher to which one can appeal to verify their existence, nor is there any higher authority for correcting one’s knowledge of them. Beyond physics, the ultimate object for geology is nature—the external world. With persons, things are more complicated. People’s bodies are proximate objects of knowledge, subordinated to nature, but *as persons*, they are ultimate objects of knowledge.<sup>89</sup> Again, the ultimate object of theology is revelation.

### 2.3.3.3 Thought Experiment: A View from Where?

To illustrate the sheer dependence of theological knowledge on revelation, imagine you had obtained genuinely independent theological knowledge. On your own, you could describe the relationship between the Creator and creation—God and humanity. You could make true pronouncements about divine nature by looking at God, comparing him to human conceptions, and determining which concepts match God. The only question is, *where would you be standing?*

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conducts natural theology apart from the influence of the Holy Spirit and other spiritual realities. Ironically, God is the only one capable of knowing what an atheistic universe would be like—if such a concept is coherent at all.

Finally, even if I am incorrect about most of the above, a truly natural theology would not be necessary for Christian faith. It could not replace the need for special revelation; therefore, it would have little bearing on my argument in this thesis.

<sup>88</sup> One could argue that this is too reductionistic, holding that the emergent properties of geological strata should be taken as an epistemological object in its own right. In either case, the *ultimate encounter* for science is with nature.

<sup>89</sup> This need not commit me to a dualist understanding of the mind and body per se. See, e.g., Nancey C. Murphy, *Religion and Science: God, Evolution and the Soul*, ed. Carl S. Helrich (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2002), pt. 1.

To *independently* describe the Creator-creature relationship, one must stand above both. From such a vantage, one could attain an effectively certain theology: one would be a *super-god*.<sup>90</sup> However, the idea of such knowledge is incompatible with Christianity: one cannot stand above God. Therefore, theological knowledge depends on God for (a) general, *kata-physin* reasons and (b) because God is transcendent. We can somewhat directly compare science with nature—poking, prodding, repeating experiments—but we cannot directly compare our theology to God. In this sense, theology is *even more* dependent on revelation than science is on nature.

The skeptic cannot coherently consider Christianity *in its strongest form* while insisting that any claim to divine revelation is a matter of pretending.<sup>91</sup> Otherwise, he implies that even if Christianity were true, revelation would still not be a valid object of knowledge—but this rules out the Christian faith in the first place. His demand for independent knowledge of God is a demand for *pseudo-theology*: an impossible, incoherent theology. The skeptic is thus invited to engage in greater “doxastic openness” to revelation as an object of knowledge.<sup>92</sup>

## 2.4 Revelation as Authoritative

For the Christian, revelation is not merely an object of knowledge from outside nature, as though it could be compared to a message from an incomprehensibly advanced and distant alien. Revelation is *authoritative*: it is more akin to a message from the rightful king of creation.

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<sup>90</sup> “It would indeed have to be a second God who could see God directly.” Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1:19.

<sup>91</sup> E.g., “[The Church] pretended to have a revelation from God. It knew the road to eternal joy, the way to death. It preached salvation by faith, and declared that only orthodox believers could become angels, and all doubters would be damned. It knew this, and so knowing it became the enemy of discussion, of investigation, of thought. Why investigate, why discuss, why think when you know?” Robert G. Ingersoll, “The Failure of the Church and the Triumph of Reason,” in *Christianity Is Not Great: How Faith Fails*, ed. John W. Loftus (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2014), 45. “Cases of faith are instances of pretending to know something you don’t know.” Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 23.

<sup>92</sup> “Doxastic openness ... is a willingness and ability to revise beliefs. Doxastic openness occurs the moment one becomes aware of one’s ignorance; it is the instant one realizes one’s beliefs may not be true. Doxastic openness is the beginning of genuine humility.” Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 51.

### 2.4.1 *Thought Experiment: Flashlight vs. Sun*

Imagine your friend Fred joining you for an afternoon at the local escape room. At some point during your adventure, you enter a dark room with a flashlight in it. Fred operates the flashlight, illuminating a sign with instructions: go through the left door. The door opens to a fenced-in area exposed to daylight. “Look,” you say, “there’s a sign saying that we have to dig in this area over here.” “Hold on,” says Fred, still using the flashlight and peering at the sign. “Okay, right. Let’s dig.” After a shared laugh, you look around for a shovel.

What makes this exchange funny is that Fred pretends to trust the flashlight—a lower ‘authority’—more than the illumination of the sun itself—a higher authority. He attempts to use the flashlight to verify the sun’s illumination, but this is clearly wrong-headed. If he weren’t joking, there would be no recourse, for no brighter light is available to verify the sun. In his situation, Fred must either receive the sun’s light as the highest luminary authority or not.<sup>93</sup>

Suppose Fred were to don unique sunglasses that dim the sun but not the flashlight, attempting to compare them as equals and *determine* which is brighter. This, too, is nonsensical since the recognition of the sun’s greater brilliance is already built into the sunglasses. Fred can shield himself from the sun’s light, but he can neither cause it to be dimmer (at its source) nor

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<sup>93</sup> Readers may object that it is at least possible to test the Sun’s light in terms of *coherence*: that the Sun’s light is both coherent with itself (i.e., the picture of things it illuminates is not self-contradictory, whatever that might mean) and with lesser luminaries (i.e., the Sun does not reveal a *different* picture than the flashlight—only a more complete and detailed view). At first glance, this perhaps appears not far from C. S. Lewis’s statement, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.” “Is Theology Poetry?,” in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses*, rev. ed., 1980, 140.

However, Lewis describes his experience *downstream* from receiving the sun/Christianity as a trustworthy illumination source. This is not a case of refusing an encounter—demanding a neutral arena to test Christianity against naturalism (what he calls “the scientific points of view” in this passage)—but a case of reasoning *from* this encounter. His comparison of moving from naturalism to Christianity to waking up from a nightmare bears this out: there is no neutral space for comparing a nightmare to one’s waking life—only the fact that the latter can account for the former and not vice versa. “Is Theology Poetry?,” 138–40.

This analogy is only meant to illustrate the top-down nature of divine authority. “Certainly we cannot compare special revelation to the sustained light in the noonday sun, for this would mean that God’s revelation is continually and immediately accessible to Christians, whereas revelation is God’s free act of self-disclosure, which must occur again and again if we are to remain in the truth.” Bloesch, *A Theology of Word & Spirit*, 163.

verify its light by his own means. Any attempt to separate the sun from its own brilliance is to experience the sun *less*, and any attempt to separate divine revelation from authority is to reject a fundamental part of revelation itself.

#### 2.4.2 *Ultimate Authority*

Similar to ways of knowing, appeals to authority eventually reach an upper limit: one either accepts the final authority or not. In the case of science, there is no higher authority than nature itself. A better understanding of nature can always correct scientific theories, but nature itself—the object of science—can never be corrected. For Christianity, the highest authority is God’s own self-disclosure: revelation. Not unlike the illumination of the sun in our thought experiment, ultimate authority can be neither guaranteed nor corrected by any lesser authority—to argue otherwise would be logically incoherent. Any human legitimately encountered by such an authority faces only two options: accept or reject. There is no room for neutral ground between accepting and rejecting the ultimate authority of Jesus Christ—no more than there is any room for our two soldiers to find a compromise between their respective loyalties.

#### 2.4.3 *The Skeptic and Divine Authority*

The matter of divine authority is, of course, a point of departure between the Christian and the skeptic, who takes biblical warnings against false teachers as a problem for intellectual honesty. However, this objection does not consider Christianity at its best, allowing for how things might appear if Christianity were indeed true. Behind the skeptic’s accusation that the apostles commit genetic and *ad hominem* fallacies in their warnings lies the assumption that they cannot be writing with authority. However, if God does exist as a legitimate, transcendent, higher authority, he has every right to have his apostles pen such warnings. This is not entirely unlike a

scientist's obligation to warn against pseudoscience. In both cases, there is a legitimate authority that listeners must accept or not. It is thus incoherent for the skeptic to accuse the Christian of intellectual dishonesty simply because she accepts God as the highest authority.

#### 2.4.3.1 Extraordinary Evidence

Sagan's adage that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence" is a favourite among those who make the dishonesty objection. Recall the conditions under which Coyne says he might accept the Christian faith, such as Jesus' appearance in the sky, accompanied by angels, apostles, and healings of amputees:

If this were all witnessed by others and documented by video, and if the healings were unexplainable but supported by testimony from multiple doctors, and if all the apparitions and events conformed to Christian theology—then I'd have to start thinking seriously about the truth of Christianity. Perhaps such eyewitness evidence isn't even necessary. If, as Sagan suggested, the New Testament contained unequivocal information about DNA, evolution, quantum mechanics, or other scientific phenomena that couldn't have been known to its authors, it would be hard not to accept some divine inspiration.<sup>94</sup>

Notably, Coyne appears to walk back his words immediately:

Perhaps other scientists would call me credulous. My scenario about a visiting Jesus could, they say, be a gigantic con game played by aliens with the technology to pull off such a stunt. ... After all, the science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke's "third law" was "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." But I think you can substitute "God" for "magic." And this is why my acceptance of God would be provisional, subject to revocation if a naturalistic explanation arose later. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, but we can never say that such evidence is impossible.<sup>95</sup>

Whether Coyne is inclined to accept the faith or not, his approach places his rational capacities firmly above any divine authority. Even if faced with some of the most substantial evidence that he can imagine for Christianity, he does not see himself accepting the authority of

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<sup>94</sup> Coyne, *Faith versus Fact*, 118–19.

<sup>95</sup> Coyne, *Faith versus Fact*, 119.

God. Human rationality *permanently* remains the highest court of authority for him. Thus, Coyne is only willing to accept the independent, super-god pseudo-theology mentioned earlier.

The problem is not that Coyne wants to use reason to recognize Christian truths *per se*;<sup>96</sup> the problem is his standard: nothing can ever reach the bar of revelation—it is still under the bar of his reason *after* the point of would-be recognition. Put another way, he either makes it impossible to recognize bona fide revelation, or he is only willing to acknowledge a form of a ‘revelation’ (in truth, *observation*) that remains permanently subordinated to reason. In other words, not even the most extraordinary evidence imaginable could cause him to recognize authoritative revelation. His provisional recognition of some Christian truths would remain at the level of observation (achieved), not revelation (received).

#### 2.4.3.2 Can There Be Evidence?

Skeptics such as Boghossian prize willingness to change one’s mind, given sufficient evidence: “an atheist is willing to revise their belief (if provided sufficient evidence); the faithful permit no such revision.”<sup>97</sup> Dawkins chides Christians who believe the Bible is true: “if the evidence seems to contradict it, it is the evidence that must be thrown out, not the book.”<sup>98</sup> However, a fascinating discussion between them suggests something different entirely:

*Boghossian:* What would it take for you to believe in God?

*Dawkins:* I used to say it would be very simple. It would be the Second Coming of Jesus or a great, big, deep, booming, bass voice saying, “I am God.” But I was persuaded, mostly by Steve Zara, who is a regular contributor to my website. He more or less persuaded me that even if there was this booming voice in the Second Coming with clouds of glory, the probable explanation is that it is a hallucination or a conjuring trick by David Copperfield. He made the point that a supernatural explanation for anything is

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<sup>96</sup> There is a longstanding debate in Christian apologetics about the role of reason in such things, as exemplified by different schools of thought in theology (Calvinism vs. Arminianism) and apologetics (presuppositionalism vs. evidentialism), and I will not be resolving such differences here. See, e.g., Craig et al., *Five Views on Apologetics*.

<sup>97</sup> Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 28.

<sup>98</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 319.

incoherent. It doesn't add up to an explanation for anything. A non-supernatural Second Coming could be aliens from outer space.

[Boghossian is in full agreement with Dawkins, arguing, for example, that if the stars spelled out a message from God, we would first have to rule out alternative explanations, like an alien trickster culture. Dawkins agrees.]

*Boghossian:* So [the stars aligned into a message] couldn't be enough. So, what would persuade you?

*Dawkins:* Well, I'm starting to think nothing would, which, in a way, goes against the grain because I've always paid lip service to the view that a scientist should change his mind when evidence is forthcoming. The trouble is, I can't think what that evidence would look like.

[The two then discuss some message or evidence for God that might be hidden in nature or mathematics, but not even this is sufficient.]

*Boghossian:* I think that [the] way to think about the problem—as a principle ... it should be able to be derived by reason. ... Something that stood in isomorphic relationship with the very structure of reality that was in a numerical code like pi, and then somehow ... [Here they reject the idea because not even God could meddle with necessary numerical constants.] So yeah, I don't really know *what* it would take.<sup>99</sup>

These skeptics would fail McCormick's Defeasibility Test. Regardless, it is well worth reading Zara's words, which Dawkins found compelling. Zara stridently states that there can be *no* evidence for God (or any god). His reason is that gods "represent ultimates":

There is no-one higher than Yahweh to appeal to. ... This ultimate nature of gods is beyond evidence. After all, how could it possibly be tested? ...

... None of [Yahweh's] attributes could ever be shown to be true using science. Not because science is flawed, but because none of these attributes could ever be shown to be true using any test against reality. ...

... Gods of weather aren't too dangerous to believe in. ... The problem starts when people insist that they know about Gods of Morality ... [because] there is no appeal, no higher authority, by definition. And that's bad.

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<sup>99</sup> "Richard Dawkins in Conversation with Peter Boghossian," (public dialogue, Portland State University, October 11, 2013), 53:12, <https://youtu.be/RoQurwEZmmQ>. The remarks referenced here begin at about 12:27 (<https://youtu.be/RoQurwEZmmQ?t=747>), helpfully transcribed in part by Michael, "Dawkins Admits Nothing Can Persuade Him God Exists," *Shadow To Light* (blog), February 25, 2020, accessed February 10, 2023, <https://shadowtolight.wordpress.com/2020/02/24/dawkins-admits-nothing-can-persuade-him-god-exists/>.

This is why theism is not just a philosophical mistake, but a moral hazard. It's a source of claims of unchallengeable ultimate moral authority. It bypasses civilized standards of equality and fairness, and it's deeply undemocratic. ...

... We should make it clear that all arguments that lead to gods are wrong because they lead to gods! God is a singular mistake, a philosophical division by zero, a point at which the respectability of arguments break[s] down. God is out of the question, the ultimate wrong answer.<sup>100</sup>

The Christian cannot wholly agree with Zara. Still, he shows some recognition of the true implications of divine revelation: a greater authority *cannot* be underwritten by a lesser one.

Unlike Coyne, Zara recognizes that divine authority is *ultimate* in the final analysis and cannot be tested against anything. His final comments about God being “a singular mistake, a philosophical division by zero, [and] a point at which the respectability of arguments break[s] down” emphasize the problem of position between the skeptic and the Christian.<sup>101</sup>

It is not too much to say that these skeptics are “immune to rational objection”<sup>102</sup> regarding their *a priori* rejection of any transcendent, ultimate, legitimate authority. The skeptic may balk at the suggestion that he has a “pretension ... against the knowledge of God,”<sup>103</sup> but the voices considered above do little to suggest otherwise. Coyne criticizes Giberson because “no data could dispel his belief in God,”<sup>104</sup> but his own rejection of a transcendent *authority* is just as

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<sup>100</sup> Steve Zara, “There Can Be No Evidence for God (Revisited),” *The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science* (blog), July 30, 2011, accessed January 21, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140121204114/http://old.richarddawkins.net/discussions/642394-there-can-be-no-evidence-for-god-revisited>. (This page is no longer available, so it can only be accessed using the Internet Archive.)

<sup>101</sup> Zara, “There Can Be No Evidence for God (Revisited).”

<sup>102</sup> Pace Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*, viii.

<sup>103</sup> 2 Cor. 10:5 (NIV).

<sup>104</sup> Coyne, *Faith versus Fact*, 119. Moreover, Coyne is unfair toward Giberson. A fuller quotation of Giberson is as follows: “Gould and Dawkins are smart guys and know way more about evolution than I do. But they are also agnostics and thus have no choice but to deny any overarching purpose to natural history. ... They may be right, of course, but let us admit that their guess is no better than mine.”

We can agree, perhaps, that the inspection of natural history per se provides no certain indication that we are the ‘expected results’ of some hidden patterns. However, there is another way to look at this. As a believer in God, I am convinced *in advance* ...” *Saving Darwin*, 213. In his own way, Giberson thus expresses both the problem of position (see § 2.6) and the revelation-dependent nature of theological knowledge.

Similarly, when Giberson writes about the potential social fallout if he were to abandon the faith, he does so to bolster his credibility for rejecting Intelligent Design (ID) as a scientific theory. In effect, he says, *Look at the*

intractable. Dawkins cannot imagine evidence to convince him of God's existence because he is only willing to consider independent, non-authoritative knowledge of God. This is not unlike a solipsist who fails to specify what evidence would convince him of the external world. For the skeptic, avoiding falsehood is more important "than gaining truth." He "must be *shown* wrong before anyone can claim to know anything";<sup>105</sup> he will not accept what could possibly trick him.

#### 2.4.4 *Don't Cross the Modalities*

Torrance holds that the modality of reason for one object (e.g., a rock) is inappropriate for another (a person). *How, then, can the knowing project appropriate to one object justify the existence and pursuit of another object?* Here we have in mind *ultimate* objects; perhaps physics can justify the pursuit of geology in some sense, but one cannot proceed purely from the empirical inquiry of the physical world to the existence of other minds.<sup>106</sup> Rather, we find ourselves encountered by other minds (as persons) and proceed in knowing them 'by faith.' The mode of reason appropriate to the natural world—science—is not appropriate for knowing (much less verifying) a transcendent, ultimate, legitimate authority. It is better to say, "extraordinary claims require extraordinary *encounters*."

The dishonesty objection compares 'apples to oranges.' No one would ask whether mathematics is more intellectually honest than friendship—or set up chemistry vs. cartography or lab reports vs. poetry. None of these ways of knowing has more 'universal honesty units' than the other. The related conditions, challenges, and expectations for intellectual honesty vary

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*strong social incentive I have to accept ID—and yet I still do not accept it because I believe it is both scientifically and theologically unsound. Saving Darwin*, 156. Ironically, Coyne argues for Giberson's intellectual dishonesty by presenting an example of his intellectual honesty: resisting an incentive to accept ID.

<sup>105</sup> Moreland, *Love God with All Your Mind*, 142; emphasis added.

<sup>106</sup> Some apologists make a case for theism based on such a gap. See, e.g., Victor Reppert, *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea: A Philosophical Defense of Lewis's Argument from Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003).

according to the object at hand. As John Polkinghorne puts it, “there is no universal epistemology.”<sup>107</sup> For the skeptic to assert that describing and quantifying the natural world is more intellectually honest than a relationship with the Creator of nature is a form of scientism.

## 2.5 Revelation as Transformative

In all his theology, Barth safeguards the “infinite qualitative difference between God and man”;<sup>108</sup> that is, “the absolute otherness of God, which relativizes every human situation and effort.”<sup>109</sup> Central to Barth’s understanding of revelation is the idea that God freely gives himself to be known.<sup>110</sup> In doing so, “He acts towards us as the same triune God that He is in Himself, and in such a way that, ... we receive a share in the truth of *His knowledge of Himself*. Certainly it is the share which He thinks proper and which is therefore suitable for us. But in this share we have the reality of the true knowledge of Himself.”<sup>111</sup>

For Barth, revelation is not arrived at by human inquiry.<sup>112</sup> In the free decision of God, it confronts the elect such that “they must begin by thinking of the truth of its reality,” and “they can no longer withdraw into themselves in order to affirm, question or deny it thence. Its truth has come home to them, has become their own. And in the process they themselves have become the truth’s.”<sup>113</sup> This “self-confirming acquaintance” is such that these men and women “can no

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<sup>107</sup> “We can only know the quantum world in terms respectful of its veiling, and it would be epistemically disastrous to try to insist on the Newtonian clarity that we can often attain in the macroscopic world of everyday phenomena. If that epistemic specificity is true of subatomic physics, it is surely even more important to recognise a similar truth in relation to the knowledge of God.” John Polkinghorne, *Science and the Trinity: The Christian Encounter with Reality* (New Haven: Yale University, 2004), 77.

<sup>108</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge: Explorations in the Interrelations of Scientific and Theological Enterprise* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 286.

<sup>109</sup> Archie J. Spencer, “THS 742: Lecture XIII,” *Christian Theology*, March 21, 2011, video, 1:13:17, <http://www.christiantheology.ca/videos/th-742-lecture-xiii/>.

<sup>110</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:15.

<sup>111</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1:51.

<sup>112</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:§4. Again, here I’ve used the word “revelation,” but Barth says, “Word of God.”

<sup>113</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:188.

longer exist without it but only with it, that they can only think of its reality as true, that they can only start their existence with the truth of its existence and nature.”<sup>114</sup>

The Apostle Paul calls the Christian a “new creation” with the “mind of Christ,”<sup>115</sup> emphasizing the transformative nature of Christian faith. Christian “truth is not merely conceptual ... but also existential, for it alters human existence, it brings to the person ensnared by sin a new being as well as a new perception of reality.”<sup>116</sup> If the skeptic is to understand Christian faith *in its strongest form*, it is critically important for him to appreciate this point: revelation is not merely transcendent, ultimate, and authoritative—it is also *transformative*. The Christian understands herself to *exist differently* downstream from this encounter.<sup>117</sup>

## 2.6 The Problem of Position

There is some abstract common ground between the Christian and the skeptic regarding the definition of intellectual dishonesty. Still, the *problem of position* alluded to throughout this chapter prevents what might have been a typical apologetic response.

### 2.6.1 *The Christian’s Position Under God*

The source of the problem of position is the uniqueness of theology’s object of knowledge: divine revelation cannot fit into any normal category of human knowledge. The

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<sup>114</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:188.

<sup>115</sup> 2 Cor. 5:17; 1 Cor 2:16.

<sup>116</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 301.

<sup>117</sup> From one perspective, one could consider *any* encounter with an ultimate object to be transformative. E.g., a neuroscientist might know an awful lot about a particular woman subject by studying her brain, but this is not the same thing as knowing a person. Upon meeting her and engaging in conversation, one could say he *exists differently* downstream from that encounter—an encounter that no information about neutral structures could replace. We can also think of one’s encounter with the external world as transformative, but this is more challenging since we all stand downstream from that encounter. If we were to imagine a ‘perfect solipsist’—a lucid, thinking person who has never received any sensory input—he too might be transformed and exist differently downstream from an encounter with the external world. In this sense, to be born is a transforming encounter. It would be too much to say that Jesus was thinking along such lines in his conversation with Nicodemus, but interestingly, he refers to being “born again.” John 3:1-21 (NIV).

Creator-creature distinction frustrates attempts to achieve independent knowledge of God. One can set up a nature-revelation analogy from the human or creaturely end of things, explored in chapter 3. However, no analogy is possible from the Creator's end of things: nature and revelation could hardly be more different, and we will pursue this further in chapter 4.

### 2.6.2 *The Christian's Position Before the Skeptic*

The Christian's position does not change the ground rules for intellectual honesty—a duty toward reality: it *expands* her reality. The skeptic understands intellectual honesty as something owed to ourselves and each other, but the Christian understands it as something first owed to God. Intellectual honesty is a duty to the truth, but the Christian insists Jesus *is* the truth. Where the Christian accepts divine revelation as an object of knowledge, the skeptic rejects the possibility, desiring independent knowledge of God. Where the skeptic resists any moral or epistemological authority above humanity, the Christian accepts God as both.

Finally, the Christian understands herself as transformed by revelation. She can strive to be *intellectually* neutral—fair-minded—but not *ontologically* neutral: she cannot un-transform herself for argument's sake. A neutral evaluation of the Christian's intellectual honesty cannot proceed, for no one can hold the two universes—Christian and atheistic—side-by-side to compare them from outside: there is no final, neutral way to exclude the twin possibilities that the Christian is deluded in Dawkins's sense and that the skeptic is deluded in the biblical sense.

### 2.6.3 *Two Poles of Authority*

For the Christian, there are two poles of authority, both of which come into play for intellectual honesty. First, there is the authority of God, *revelational authority*, which the skeptic does not recognize. This authority is most centrally understood to reside in Jesus Christ as the

Incarnate God-Man. It includes his life and teachings, and it is present in the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures, traditions, and life of the Church. Christian faith, practice, and theology rely on this authority. Second, the Christian recognizes an authority that is common to her and the skeptic: the *investigational authority* that comes from expertise or deep acquaintance, such as the authority of an electrician to advise a homeowner about the best way to add a circuit to their breaker panel, or the authority of a climate scientist to discuss global warming. Science relies on this type of authority, which the Christian can understand as delegated to humanity by God.<sup>118</sup>

#### 2.6.4 *Objections Roundup 2*

Since Christians recognize two poles of authority, it is challenging to work out their relationship. For a skeptic, sensing no need to reconcile Scripture with nature, it is easy to avoid the pitfalls of imposing one's reading of Scripture onto science. For those who recognize both nature and revelation as objects of knowledge, this is more complicated; it should not be surprising that Christians have struggled to do justice to science and Scripture simultaneously.

A similar observation applies to Craig's comments on the ministerial use of reason, the role of the Holy Spirit, and the difference between *knowing* and *showing* that Christianity is true. First, his comments on the ministerial use of reason can rightly apply to any object of knowledge. If one were to apply a magisterial use of reason to nature, science could not proceed: the dictates of one's preconceptions would override empirical inquiry; if the results of an experiment contradicted a reigning theory or mathematical model, e.g., the experimental results would be perceived as less authoritative than the abstract reasoning—not unlike the ancient

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<sup>118</sup> E.g., Prov. 25:2; Eccles. 1:13-17. See McLeish, *Faith and Wisdom in Science*.

Greek approach. Understood from this angle, it should not be so controversial to hold that a ministerial use of reason should be taken toward revelation.

Second, Craig's knowing-showing approach can be understood along similar lines. I would put it differently: "We *know* Christianity is true primarily by the self-authenticating witness of God's Spirit. We *show* Christianity is [probable, reasonable, or not necessarily false] by presenting good arguments for its central tenets [and good responses to objections]."<sup>119</sup> A scientist knows that the external world exists by its self-authenticating qualities, and he enjoys a fruitful epistemological relationship with nature downstream from that encounter. If he meets a solipsist, he might attempt to show that the external world probably exists, or is not necessarily illusory, by presenting good arguments and responses to objections—but it is not intellectually dishonest for him to refuse to adopt solipsism.

Finally, we come to Craig's view that "should a conflict arise between the witness of the Holy Spirit to the fundamental truth of the Christian faith and beliefs based on argument and evidence, then it is the former which must take precedence over the latter, not vice versa."<sup>120</sup> The skeptic would take no issue if a biologist said, "should a conflict arise between the evidence for evolution and argument and evidence presented by a young-earth creationist, then it is the former which must take precedence." We might imagine Rae the realist saying, "should a conflict arise between your intuition that the external world exists and argument and evidence presented by Sam the solipsist, then it is the former which must take precedence." The skeptic can always present Craig's words such that they seem intellectually dishonest. A more charitable view is that

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<sup>119</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 58; emphasis in original. It seems too strong to say that the believer can show that Christianity is true (positive apologetics) in any final way using reason—apart from revelation—but reason can be very useful for responding to objections (negative apologetics).

<sup>120</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 48.

this is a matter of authority: a biologist is justified in warning her students away from error, and an apologist is justified in similarly warning his readers.

## 2.7 Summary and Next Steps

This chapter has invited the skeptic to adopt a charitable and nuanced picture of the epistemological situation in which the Christian finds herself. While there is common ground in defining intellectual dishonesty in the abstract, in practice, there is a great distance between them, which I call the problem of position. When theology is viewed as a way of knowing legitimate, transcendent, authoritative, and transformative divine revelation, several of the skeptic's accusations break down. He cannot coherently question the Christian's intellectual honesty—a *de jure* criticism—while simultaneously insisting that the only possible theological knowledge must be guaranteed to himself, *by himself*, and *on his own terms*: such an insistence rules out Christianity in the first place—a *de facto* denial. The following chapter will expand on how Christians might understand science and theology as ways of knowing.

## Chapter 3

### Science and Theology as Ways of Knowing

The previous chapter has argued that nothing is *necessarily* intellectually dishonest about being open to the possibility of legitimate, transcendent, authoritative, and transformative divine revelation. Unless the skeptic is prepared to rule out Christianity in advance, he must consider the position that humanity would be in before the Christian God. We now turn to outlining how the Christian might understand science and theology as ways of knowing their proper objects: by exploring similarities between them, we can further address the skeptic's objections.

#### 3.1 Falsification Is Not the Only Option

Falsification plays a central role in the dishonesty objection. Whereas the Christian faith engages in self-defensive apologetics, the skeptic argues, science embraces self-criticism by trying to prove reigning theories false. We will return to this objection presently, but here we must point out that the skeptic overemphasizes the role of falsification in science. In truth, there is no universally accepted view of scientific knowledge. On the contrary, several epistemologies have waxed and waned over the history of science: logical positivism, falsification, more pragmatic theories, etc.<sup>1</sup> Even today, while their approach is the same in practice, scientists may disagree philosophically on realism vs. antirealism,<sup>2</sup> and some insist they have no use for

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<sup>1</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Science and Religion: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), chap. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, chap. 16. An antirealist or *instrumentalist* philosophy of science is not the same as the solipsism explored earlier: unlike Sam the solipsist, an antirealist scientist still treats nature as a legitimate object of knowledge in practice despite his philosophical misgivings.

philosophy at all.<sup>3</sup> The popular portrayal of science may extol it as perfectly objective, falsification-centred, and based on evidence alone, but this is not the whole picture.

### 3.1.1 *Falsification and Positivism*

The skeptic's insistence on verifiable knowledge is evocative of the logical positivism movement of the twentieth century, which advocated for a *verification principle* of meaning:

an informative sentence, to be meaningful, must be capable in principle of being empirically verified. Since religious statements like “God exists” or “God loves the world” were, in their opinion, incapable of being empirically verified, positivistic philosophers held them to be literally meaningless, as if one had asserted [gibberish].”<sup>4</sup>

In response to criticism, this developed into the *falsification principle*, “which held that a meaningful sentence must be capable in principle of being empirically falsified,”<sup>5</sup> which calls to mind Karl Popper's understanding of scientific theories.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, for philosophers today, “positivism is dead, or at least as dead as a philosophical stance or movement ever becomes, but it is still alive among many scientists and others who are not well-versed in, or knowledgeable about, what has occurred in technical philosophy since the 1950s.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> E.g., astrophysicist and skeptic of religion Neil deGrasse Tyson dismisses “philosophy as a useless enterprise and actually advised bright students to stay away from it,” necessitating a public correction from philosopher and biologist Massimo Pigliucci, also a skeptic of religion. “Neil DeGrasse Tyson and the Value of Philosophy,” *HuffPost* (blog), July 16, 2014, accessed February 18, 2023, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/neil-degrasse-tyson-and-the-value-of-philosophy\\_b\\_5330216](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/neil-degrasse-tyson-and-the-value-of-philosophy_b_5330216).

It is difficult to appreciate such sweeping dismissals of philosophy from popularizers of science because—whether one acknowledges it or not—science relies on philosophical presuppositions: “(1) the existence of a theory-independent, external world; (2) the orderly nature of the external world; (3) the knowability of the external world; (4) the existence of truth; (5) the laws of logic; (6) the reliability of our cognitive and sensory faculties to serve as truth gatherers and as a source of justified beliefs in our intellectual environment; (7) the adequacy of language to describe the world; (8) the existence of values used in science (e.g., “test theories fairly and report test results honestly”); (9) the uniformity of nature and induction; (10) the existence of numbers”—or at least the usefulness of numbers (see note on abstract objects in § 2.3.3.2). Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 348.

<sup>4</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 154.

<sup>5</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 154.

<sup>6</sup> Recall the skeptic's endorsement of Popperian falsification in § 1.2.3.

<sup>7</sup> “Positivism (Philosophy),” *New World Encyclopedia*, n.d., accessed February 18, 2023, [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Positivism\\_\(philosophy\)](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Positivism_(philosophy)).

### 3.1.2 *Science and Personal Knowledge*

Chemist turned philosopher Michael Polanyi rejects the positivist ideal of science as independent of human subjectivity and cultural-historical contingency: “complete objectivity as usually attributed to the exact sciences is a delusion and is in fact a false ideal.”<sup>8</sup> The Western philosophical tradition has attempted to account for how persons know things by ignoring the involvement of persons, but *there can be no knowledge without a person knowing it*. The objective-or-nothing view of knowledge has painted itself into a corner, leading to skepticism, self-contradiction, and a flawed view of knowledge in general and science in particular.<sup>9</sup> The attempt to imagine science as wholly objective, *impersonal* knowledge “presents us with a picture of the universe in which we ourselves are absent. In such a universe there is no one capable of creating and upholding scientific values; hence there is no science.”<sup>10</sup>

The scientist’s subjective involvement makes science possible: science must hold that “certain emotions are right” for its purpose, making good use of “intellectual passions” for

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (1962; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974), 18. Lesslie Newbigin helpfully explains Polanyi’s context: “A disastrous shift in the way science was being understood and practiced, experienced by Polanyi especially through his contacts with the Soviet leadership during the 1930s, prompted him to move from the work of research science to the study and teaching of philosophy. The Soviet leaders regarded science simply as a necessary tool for the implementation of their social planning. The idea that pure science should be practiced as an avenue to truth was dismissed as bourgeois nonsense. Science was a necessary instrument in the pursuit of power. And it was obvious that the Russians were only pushing more logically in the direction that was being taken elsewhere. Polanyi had to ask himself, ‘What are the grounds for believing that the findings of science are not merely useful but true?’ In the attempt to answer this question, he came to the conclusion that we had been misled by the illusion of a totally objective knowledge. If objectivity means that we must aim for the greatest possible truthfulness in our thinking and speaking about realities beyond our own minds, then of course it is a proper goal. But if it means that all subjective elements are excluded, then it is obviously absurd to suppose that total objectivity is possible; for, if there is no subject who knows, there is no knowing.” *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 45.

<sup>9</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 286.

<sup>10</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 142. “Men may go on talking the language of positivism, pragmatism, and naturalism for many years,” Polanyi observes, “yet continue to respect the principles of truth and morality which their vocabulary anxiously ignores.” *Personal Knowledge*, 232.

interpreting data, focusing research, etc.<sup>11</sup> Objectivist accounts of science concentrate only on the “practical demonstration of scientific law,” overlooking how discovery and verification happen in practice.<sup>12</sup> A scientist might ignore experimental results that seem to undermine an accepted paradigm *in the hope* that later they will be explained within that paradigm; other times, the paradigm must change. There is no definite, objective rule or method that can dictate when such results should be accepted or dismissed as anomalies—only the personal decisions of scientists.<sup>13</sup>

Polanyi is adamant that his epistemology is not a denial of the external world:<sup>14</sup> personal knowledge is not wholly subjective or relativist. Rather, “all our personal and rational activity operates with two poles, a subjective pole and an objective pole. The subjective pole is the knowing, believing, acting person, and the objective pole is ‘the other’, either another person or some reality independent of himself.”<sup>15</sup> Just as an overly modern, objectivist approach denies the subjective pole of knowledge, an overly postmodern, relativist view denies its objective pole.

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<sup>11</sup> “Science can then no longer hope to survive on an island of positive facts, around which the rest of man’s intellectual heritage sinks to the status of subjective emotionalism. It must claim that certain emotions are right; and if it can make good such a claim, it will not only save itself but sustain by its example the whole system of cultural life of which it forms part.” Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 134.

<sup>12</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 13–14.

<sup>13</sup> “During the eighteenth century the French Academy of Science stubbornly denied the evidence for the fall of meteorites, which seemed massively obvious to everybody else. Their opposition to the superstitious beliefs which a popular tradition attached to such heavenly intervention blinded them to the facts in question.” Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 138.

<sup>14</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 316.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, ed., *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi’s Thought for Christian Faith and Life* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1980), 11.

## 3.1.2.1 Knowledge: Focal and Subsidiary

Polanyi introduces the idea of *indwelling*: extending one's influence (even one's *being*) to include a tool, teaching, or person to better know and interact with some greater context.<sup>16</sup> E.g., a blind man 'indwells' a stick to 'see' the world around him:

As we learn to use a probe, or to use a stick for feeling our way, our awareness of its impact on our hand is transformed into a sense of its point touching the objects we are exploring. ... We become aware of the feelings in our hand in terms of their meaning located at the tip of the probe or stick to which we are attending. This is so also when we use a tool. We are attending to the meaning of its impact on our hands in terms of its effect on the things to which we are applying it.<sup>17</sup>

Alister McGrath helpfully explains further:

Just as the blind man learns to trust his white stick and depend upon it, so we are obliged to trust our perceptions. Occasionally, they may mislead us. Knowledge is thus not disembodied ideas, as the Enlightenment suggested, but involves the personal element of commitment both to what is known, and the means which must be used to know it.<sup>18</sup>

Indwelling is "the act of knowing in which we gain new meaning," which includes science.<sup>19</sup>

Polanyi distinguishes two forms of awareness: "*focal* [awareness] by 'attending to' and *subsidiary* [awareness] by 'relying on.'"<sup>20</sup> The blind man's subsidiary awareness of his stick makes his focal awareness of his environment possible.

There can be focal and subsidiary awareness of the same items[,] but no awareness can be completely focal. To be aware of something subsidiarily is not to be aware of it in itself but only as a clue or an instrument pointing beyond itself. ... For example, the words of a sentence refer thought to something independent of them; the use of a pair of stereo pictures focusses attention on their joint image. ... We are subsidiarily aware of a hammer in our hand when driving in a nail.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Indwelling is "the activity of knowing whereby the mind dwells in a coherence or integration latent in some object (or teaching or person) in order to interiorise it until there is a structural kinship between the knowing subject and the object known. In this way the natural integration in the object known is so assimilated into the knower that it functions as the subsidiary term in his focal understanding of it. Theologically regarded, indwelling is an act [of] meditation and worship in and through which we are given access to God in his own inner communion." Torrance, *Belief in Science*, 139.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009), 12–13.

<sup>18</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Science and Religion: An Introduction*, 85.

<sup>19</sup> Torrance, *Belief in Science*, 139.

<sup>20</sup> Torrance, *Belief in Science*, 137.

<sup>21</sup> Torrance, *Belief in Science*, 137.

A great deal of our subsidiary awareness is *tacit*, or *inarticulate*: knowledge that cannot be put into words. E.g., not all the knowledge relied upon when riding a bicycle can be put into words:<sup>22</sup> “we always know more than we can tell. It is on this deep subsidiary awareness that all skills, explicit thought, formal reasoning, and articulate knowing and communication rely.”<sup>23</sup>

### 3.1.2.2 Scientific Discovery

The moment of scientific discovery is an example of *subsidiary-focal integration*, which occurs when subsidiary knowledge combines with focal, or *articulate*, knowledge to become new focal knowledge: discovery. It is “a logical leap, a personal feat, a nonlinear move from parts to whole that innovatively links hitherto disparate particulars, transforming the meaning and appearance of all it encompasses.”<sup>24</sup> This leap occurs across a “logical gap”:<sup>25</sup> an irreversible advance in knowledge that cannot be accounted for in purely logical terms.<sup>26</sup> It requires *commitment*, a deliberate action taken by accrediting what one believes to be true, in full awareness that it “might conceivably be false.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Esther L. Meek, “Michael Polanyi and Alvin Plantinga: Help from Beyond the Walls,” *Philosophia Christi* 14, no. 1 (2012): 63.

<sup>23</sup> Torrance, *Belief in Science*, 145.

<sup>24</sup> Meek, “Michael Polanyi and Alvin Plantinga,” 62.

<sup>25</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 123.

<sup>26</sup> “The irreversible character of discovery suggests that no solution of a problem can be accredited as a discovery if it is achieved by a procedure following definite rules. For such a procedure would be reversible in the sense that it could be traced back stepwise to its beginning and repeated at will any number of times, like any arithmetical computation. Accordingly, any strictly formalized procedure would also be excluded as a means of achieving discovery.” Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 123.

<sup>27</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 214.

As a practical example of subsidiary-focal integration, consider figure 3-1. The solution may take time for those who have not seen this image before. The problem is that we cannot see anything beyond our focal awareness: ostensibly random blotches. But if we peer long enough or are told the answer, we make the leap to focusing on the image itself: we come to see the focal solution *through* subsidiary awareness of the blotches. The move from confusion to the answer is not linear or piecemeal; it happens all at once, after which it takes effort *not* to see it.<sup>28</sup> “The immediate implication which Polanyi draws is that, if all our knowledge is to be of the kind sought by Descartes, namely, certain knowledge capable of explicit formulation in precise terms, then scientific discovery will be forever impossible.”<sup>29</sup> For Polanyi, “only statements that can be doubted make contact with reality.”<sup>30</sup>



Figure 3-1. An opportunity for subsidiary-focal integration.

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<sup>28</sup> This well-known collection of dots is a dalmatian dog. To the best of my knowledge, the original source is unknown. Gert Tonder and Yoshimichi Ejima, “Bottom-Up Clues in Target Finding: Why a Dalmatian May Be Mistaken for an Elephant,” *Perception* 29 (2000): 149–57.

<sup>29</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 62.

<sup>30</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 75.

## 3.1.2.3 Responsible Commitment

Framed this way, Polanyi conceives knowledge as *responsible commitment*: “the freedom of the subjective person to do as he pleases is overruled by the freedom of the responsible person to act as he must.”<sup>31</sup> Torrance explains that commitment is

the personal and responsible submission of the mind to the requirements of a reality independent of it. Commitment expresses a belief on the strength of which a person is prepared to entrust himself to the claims of reality upon him. Unlike its popular use, commitment, in Polanyi’s thought, is not a subjective state, for it “purposely” refers the self away to what is independent of it. Commitment is objectively, not subjectively, oriented.<sup>32</sup>

Following Polanyi, philosopher Marjorie Grene points out that knowledge has long been considered *different from belief* in traditional Western philosophy.<sup>33</sup> Either (a.i) this knowledge is somehow obtainable (Plato’s recollection, Descartes’s systematic doubt, etc.), or (a.ii) nothing other than mere belief is obtainable (skepticism—not to be confused with *the skeptic* in this thesis). Both options take an “explicitarian” approach to knowledge: nothing is considered tacit; everything must be articulable to count as knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

But if knowledge *is* permitted to be a form of belief, then perhaps (b.i) knowledge is justified, true belief. Plantinga’s account of *warrant* is an example: to count as knowledge, beliefs must be formed using cognitive faculties that are functioning properly, in the proper environment, using cognitive faculties that have been designed to form true beliefs.<sup>35</sup> But Grene is unsatisfied: “It’s not really ‘justified’ that’s troublesome, it’s ‘true’. What keeps eluding us is a way to check our beliefs against reality and find out, once and for all, whether they *are* true. ...

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<sup>31</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 309; emphasis removed.

<sup>32</sup> Torrance, *Belief in Science*, 134.

<sup>33</sup> Here “belief” means “an opinion that something is the case.” Marjorie Grene, *A Philosophical Testament* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 11–20.

<sup>34</sup> Meek, “Michael Polanyi and Alvin Plantinga,” 66.

<sup>35</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 156.

For we can't get *outside* all our beliefs at once in order to check them."<sup>36</sup> This leaves the option embraced by philosopher Esther Meek, who follows Polanyi and Grene: (b.ii) "knowledge is justified belief *in the hope of* truth."<sup>37</sup>

Following this line of thought, all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is a responsible commitment in the hope of truth.

Commitment refers to the clues we indwell subsidiarily in pursuit of a focal pattern. In other words, faith is of a piece with keeping your balance on a bike, and thus quite ordinary. *Faith just is what we do in knowing*. Belief is the epistemic act. But it is a lived body feel of a tool or framework indwelt with confidence.<sup>38</sup>

This responsible commitment is made with what Polanyi calls *universal intent*: the scientist acknowledges the "jurisdiction of reality over him" and "submits to it in good conscience," knowing it could prove to be false, but with the hope that others will recognize his conclusions as universally valid as well:<sup>39</sup>

In the last resort[,] it is reality itself that must be the judge of the truth or falsity of his work, but the scientist accepts that judgment as his own in a responsible act of binding self-legislation — hence the standards he sets for himself in his scientific activity are the standards imposed by objective reality itself on all scientists.<sup>40</sup>

### 3.1.3 *Scientific Revolutions*

For those familiar with the philosophy of science, mentioning a "paradigm shift" immediately calls to mind Thomas S. Kuhn and his seminal work in the philosophy of science, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Working from Polanyi's understanding of a paradigm,<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Grene, *A Philosophical Testament*, 17. This calls to mind the problem of position discussed earlier. Also, Grene is not explicitly reacting to Plantinga's work here but to "justified, true belief."

<sup>37</sup> Meek, "Michael Polanyi and Alvin Plantinga," 72.

<sup>38</sup> Esther L. Meek, *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 170; emphasis added.

<sup>39</sup> Torrance, *Belief in Science*, 147.

<sup>40</sup> Torrance, *Belief in Science*, 147.

<sup>41</sup> Torrance reports that he was chosen by Polanyi, a Christian himself, to be his posthumous interpreter. See *Theological and Natural Science*, chap. 8. He describes an episode in his efforts in this role. "All the other books, pamphlets, scientific papers, and relevant correspondence, from Michael's library, were duly collected by Chicago

Kuhn critiques a piecemeal, falsification-oriented view of science. “Popper famously complained that psychoanalysis could not be scientific because it resists falsification,” but for Kuhn, “resisting falsification is precisely what *every* disciplinary matrix in science does.”<sup>42</sup>

For Kuhn, a holistic view of science is more sensible: scientific theories are parts of larger theoretical frameworks in each field, called *paradigms*. Paradigms “consist of formal theories, classic experiments, and trusted methods. Scientists typically accept a prevailing paradigm and try to extend its scope by refining theories, explaining puzzling data, and establishing more precise measures of standards and phenomena.”<sup>43</sup>

Contrary to a simplistic, falsification-oriented view, Kuhn argues that science develops through “alternating ‘normal’ and ‘revolutionary’ (or ‘extraordinary’) phases.”<sup>44</sup> During a period of *normal science*, scientists proceed within the reigning paradigm (e.g., Newtonian Mechanics) by “puzzle-solving.”<sup>45</sup> Often, the goal is not to falsify what is known but to “add to the scope and precision with which the paradigm can be applied,” proving oneself to be “an expert puzzle-solver.”<sup>46</sup> The reigning paradigm provides “a criterion for choosing problems that, while the paradigm is taken for granted, can be assumed to have solutions.”<sup>47</sup>

During normal science scientists neither test nor seek to confirm the guiding theories of their disciplinary matrix [i.e., paradigm]. Nor do they regard anomalous results as falsifying those theories. ... Rather, anomalies are ignored or explained away if at all

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University for housing and display in their Regenstein Library. In it they lodged their own scientifically checked and prepared catalogue. They include, it may be added, the correspondence between Michael Polanyi and Thomas Kuhn, in which Kuhn admitted that he had taken the concept of paradigm from Michael!” *Theological and Natural Science*, 133.

<sup>42</sup> Alexander Bird, “Thomas Kuhn,” ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), accessed February 18, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/thomas-kuhn/>.

<sup>43</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Thomas S. Kuhn,” *Britannica*, July 14, 2022, accessed February 18, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-S-Kuhn>.

<sup>44</sup> Bird, “Thomas Kuhn.”

<sup>45</sup> Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 35–42.

<sup>46</sup> Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 36.

<sup>47</sup> Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 37.

possible. It is only the accumulation of particularly troublesome anomalies that poses a serious problem for the existing disciplinary matrix.<sup>48</sup>

When a critical mass of “anomalies and *ad hoc* assumptions”<sup>49</sup> accumulates (e.g., black body radiation vs. Newtonian Mechanics), a period of *revolutionary science* takes place:

Instead of simply acquiring further data or modifying theories within the existing framework, some scientists look for a new framework, which may involve a questioning of fundamental assumptions. Within the new paradigm, new kinds of data are relevant[,] and the old data are reinterpreted and seen in a new way.<sup>50</sup>

A *paradigm shift* is thus a “non-cumulative developmental [episode] in which an older paradigm is replaced in whole or in part by an incompatible new one.”<sup>51</sup> Similar to Polanyi’s subsidiary-focal integration, a scientific revolution is an irreversible shift to a more intellectually satisfying theoretical framework.

### 3.1.4 Science as Research Programs

Philosopher of mathematics and science Imre Lakatos appreciates Popper’s falsification as far as it goes, but like Polanyi and Kuhn, he finds that it “would rule out too much of everyday scientific practice ... as unscientific and irrational. For scientists often persist—and, it seems, *rationaly* persist—with theories, such as Newtonian celestial mechanics that by Popper’s standards they ought to have rejected as ‘refuted’”:<sup>52</sup>

A key example for Lakatos is the “Precession of Mercury”[;] that is, the anomalous behaviour of the perihelion of Mercury, which shifts around the Sun in a way that it ought not to do if Newton’s mechanics were correct and there were no other sizable body influencing its orbit. The problem is that there seems to be no such body. The difficulty was well known for decades[,] but it did not cause astronomers to collectively give up on Newton until Einstein’s theory came along. Lakatos thought that the astronomers were

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<sup>48</sup> Bird, “Thomas Kuhn.”

<sup>49</sup> Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 125.

<sup>50</sup> Barbour, *Religion and Science*, 125.

<sup>51</sup> Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 92.

<sup>52</sup> Alan Musgrave and Charles Pigden, “Imre Lakatos,” ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2021), accessed February 19, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/lakatos/>.

right not to abandon Newton even though Newton eventually turned out to be wrong and Einstein turned out to be right.<sup>53</sup>

Offering a middle ground between Popper's continual questioning of basic assumptions and Kuhn's emphasis on the tenacity of paradigms, Lakatos proposes "a '*hard core*' of central ideas that are preserved by making adjustments in a '*protective belt*' of more tentative auxiliary hypotheses."<sup>54</sup> Rather than approaching science in terms of "competing individual theories (Popper) or successive paradigms (Kuhn),"<sup>55</sup> Lakatos thinks in terms of *research programs*.

A research program is constituted by a hard core of ideas that is *deliberately exempted from falsification* so that its positive potentialities can be systematically developed and explored. Anomalies are accommodated by changes in the auxiliary hypotheses, which can be sacrificed [i.e., falsified] if necessary.<sup>56</sup>

E.g., physics professor Robert B. Mann lists several core commitments "in science that [are] (effectively) not falsifiable," such as the laws of conservation:

By these I mean the conservation of energy, momentum, angular momentum, and charge. It is very difficult ... [to see] how these conservation laws could be falsified in any practical terms. Indeed, whenever an experiment (apparently) finds that one of these is not conserved, the working assumption is that something has been missed — some part of the system is carrying charge, or energy, or whatever it was that was missing. This technique is used in particle physics all the time: missing energy is used to identify new particles and is not regarded as evidence that energy is not conserved. Simply put, some things don't disappear. In practice, this has been a very successful strategy for making progress in science in general and physics in particular.<sup>57</sup>

As long as a research program progresses and predicts *novel facts*,<sup>58</sup> Lakatos would have it maintained. However, when a research program is "stalled and not growing for a considerable

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<sup>53</sup> Musgrave and Pigden, "Imre Lakatos."

<sup>54</sup> Barbour, *Religion and Science*, 132.

<sup>55</sup> Barbour, *Religion and Science*, 132.

<sup>56</sup> Barbour, *Religion and Science*, 132; original emphasis removed; new emphasis added.

<sup>57</sup> Robert B. Mann, email message to author, January 26, 2019.

<sup>58</sup> These "may refer to new phenomena or to already known facts not previously related to the program." Barbour, *Religion and Science*, 132.

period and when there is a promising alternative,” it is “not *falsified* [as a whole] but is rather *displaced* as a research strategy.”<sup>59</sup>

The falsificationist might object, saying that Lakatos merely describes falsification in fancy terms: *why not just say that the hard core of theories is falsified?* First, Lakatos is rejecting Popper’s narrow view that falsification is the distinguishing mark of *all* science.<sup>60</sup> Second, Lakatos observes that “the hard core theses *by themselves* are often devoid of empirical consequences,”<sup>61</sup> which makes them unfalsifiable in the Popperian sense:

For example, Newtonian mechanics *by itself* ... won’t tell you what you will see in the night sky. To derive empirical predictions from Newtonian mechanics[,] you need a whole host of *auxiliary hypotheses* about the positions, masses and relative velocities of the heavenly bodies, including the earth. (This is related to Duhem’s thesis that, generally speaking, theoretical propositions—and indeed *sets* of theoretical propositions—cannot be conclusively falsified by experimental observations, since they only entail observation-statements in conjunction with auxiliary hypotheses. So when something goes wrong, and the observation statements that they entail turn out to be false, we have *two* intellectual options: modify the theoretical propositions or modify the auxiliary hypotheses. ...) Together with the hard core[,] these auxiliary hypotheses entail empirical predictions, thus making the theory as a whole—hard core plus auxiliary hypotheses—a falsifiable affair.<sup>62</sup>

In other words, as the conjunction of its auxiliary hypotheses and hard-core theories, a research project is ‘falsifiable’ by virtue of its auxiliary hypotheses, not the hard core per se. If we were to say that an unproductive research project was falsified (rather than displaced), it would be saying too much: it would incorrectly imply that the non-empirically vulnerable hard core was falsified in the same Popperian sense as the auxiliary theories.

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<sup>59</sup> Barbour, *Religion and Science*, 132; emphasis added.

<sup>60</sup> “Lakatos distinguished dogmatic, naïve and sophisticated falsificationist positions, attributing them to ... ‘proto-Popper, pseudo-Popper and proper-Popper’. (Popper did not appreciate being disassembled into temporal or ideological parts and protested ‘I am not a Trinity.’” Musgrave and Pigden, “Imre Lakatos.”

<sup>61</sup> Musgrave and Pigden, “Imre Lakatos.”

<sup>62</sup> Musgrave and Pigden, “Imre Lakatos”; see Roger Ariew, “Pierre Duhem,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, Fall 2014), accessed February 23, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/duhem/>.

Third, the fact that a research program is displaced does not mean that every theory (hard core or auxiliary) is falsified; several theories may carry over to a new research program. E.g., modern physics still successfully uses Newtonian mechanics for objects of relatively medium sizes and speeds.

### 3.1.5 *Objections Roundup 3*

#### 3.1.5.1 Science Is More than Falsification

Contrary to the skeptic's portrayal, the preceding discussion shows that science *cannot* so narrowly rely on falsification. Still, this should not be read as a sweeping rejection of Popperian falsification so much as a rejection of *the skeptic's appropriation* of it. By asserting that intellectual honesty requires one's views to be falsifiable, the skeptic takes Popper's criterion further than Popper himself. In response to an interviewer who questions whether his falsification concept *itself* is falsifiable, e.g., Popper replies that "it is a silly question":

His falsification concept ... is a criterion for distinguishing between empirical and non-empirical modes of knowledge. Falsification itself is "decidedly unempirical"; it belongs not to science but to philosophy, or "meta-science," and it does not even apply to all of science. Popper seemed to be admitting that his critics were right: falsification is a mere guideline, a rule of thumb, sometimes helpful, sometimes not.<sup>63</sup>

Here Popper stresses that his criterion is only meant to address empirical claims—not all human reason, as the skeptic is wont to do. If one presses falsification further to rule out God, such as the famous atheist Anthony Flew attempted,<sup>64</sup> then the criterion does refute itself. "The statement 'In order to be meaningful, an informative sentence must be capable in principle of being empirically verified/falsified' is itself incapable of being verified or falsified."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> John Horgan, "The Paradox of Karl Popper," *Scientific American* (blog), August 22, 2018, accessed February 20, 2023, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/cross-check/the-paradox-of-karl-popper/>.

<sup>64</sup> "Theology and Falsification" (lecture presented at the Socratic Club, Oxford University, Oxford, UK, May 6, 1948).

<sup>65</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 155.

Even today, if we were to insist on a rigid, universal, falsification-oriented approach to all physical phenomena, we could not overlook the fact that quantum mechanics (tiny objects) and general relativity (very fast or large objects) take mutually exclusive perspectives: for the former, time and space are discrete, quantized entities; for the latter, they are considered continuous. A Lakatosian approach allows us to have more ‘epistemological patience’ *in the hope* that we might come to a more holistic understanding. In the meantime, both branches of physics continue to be fruitful research programs, so there is no need to reject either one. Drawing on Torrance, we can say that the physicist is free to approach sub-atomic and relativistic phenomena according to the terms each (proximate) object sets for itself. There is no need to go hunting in general relativity for a reason to falsify quantum mechanics or vice versa.

Rather than being confined to Popperian falsification, the Christian may adopt a philosophy of science resembling Lakatos’s approach. It is worth noting, however, that some philosophers of science go quite a bit further in their departure from any falsification criterion. E.g., Paul Feyerabend’s

*Against Method* explicitly [draws] the “epistemological anarchist” conclusion that there are no useful and exceptionless methodological rules governing the progress of science or the growth of knowledge. The history of science is so complex that if we insist on a general methodology which will not inhibit progress[,] the only “rule” it will contain will be the useless suggestion: “anything goes.”<sup>66</sup>

We will not adopt such an extreme view for our discussion below, but this is another alternative to the Popperian philosophy of science assumed by the skeptic.<sup>67</sup> Since science itself does not meet the bar of *falsification-in-a-vacuum*, and since falsification cannot be generalized

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<sup>66</sup> John Preston, “Paul Feyerabend,” ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), accessed February 19, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/feyerabend/>.

<sup>67</sup> If we *were* to adopt an “anything goes” approach, Christianity could easily live up to such a standard.

to all human reason, there is no reason to think that the Christian faith must accept the skeptic's demand as a requirement for intellectual honesty.

### 3.1.5.2 A Word on Faith

The skeptic views faith with derision. Dawkins criticizes Christians for taking the truthfulness of revelation as “an axiom, not the end product of a process of reasoning,”<sup>68</sup> unlike his “belief in evolution,” which is “not faith” because it is falsifiable.<sup>69</sup> For Harris, faith is “the license religious people give themselves to keep believing when reasons fail.”<sup>70</sup> Loftus calls it “an *irrational* leap over the probabilities.”<sup>71</sup> Boghossian describes it as “pretending to know something one doesn't know” and an unreliable, failed epistemology.<sup>72</sup> For Dawkins, faith is a dangerous enemy of critical thinking: “Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument. ... If children were taught to question and think through their beliefs, instead of being taught the superior virtue of faith without question, it is a good bet that there would be no suicide bombers.”<sup>73</sup>

The Christian may respond in two ways. First, there is more than one definition of *faith*. From a biblical perspective alone, the word is complex. In the New Testament, faith is translated from *pisteuō*, “the term regularly used to denote the many-sided religious relationship into which the gospel calls people—that of trust in God through Christ.”<sup>74</sup> It can denote “truth believed,” “restful reliance,” and “trust.” The Old Testament “variously defines faith as resting, trusting,

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<sup>68</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 319. Dawkins refers explicitly to the “truth of the holy book,” but his words can be applied to revelation in general.

<sup>69</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 320.

<sup>70</sup> Harris, “An Atheist Manifesto.”

<sup>71</sup> Loftus, “Victor Reppert Now Says.”

<sup>72</sup> Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 27–30.

<sup>73</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 347–48. It is outside the scope of this thesis to respond to the charge that religion causes violence; see Chamberlain, *Why People Don't Believe*, chap. 3.

<sup>74</sup> Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), s.v. “Faith.”

and hoping in the Lord, cleaving to him, waiting for him, making him our shield and tower, taking refuge in him, etc.”<sup>75</sup> In the Bible, faith includes “right belief about God,” it “rests on divine testimony,” and it is understood to be a supernatural gift from God.<sup>76</sup>

Philosopher William Lad Sessions distinguishes six types of faith: (a) faith as interpersonal trust, (b) faith as persistent belief despite inadequate evidence, (c) faith as a fundamental attitude or “horizon of significance,” (d) faith as general serenity, (e) faith as loyalty or devotion, and (f) faith as hope for some deeply-desired future good—however improbable.<sup>77</sup> Dawkins and the others quoted above are primarily concerned with Sessions’s “belief model” of faith—type (b). However, the Christian faith includes many of these types, if not all of them. To pigeonhole Christian faith into just one model, and in the worst light, is not to see it at its best.

Second, the Christian can respond that science relies on several types of faith from Sessions’s list: (a) It is essential to have interpersonal trust in the scientific community to hold up scientific values—without which there is no peer review or self-correction. (b) Everyone, including the skeptic, must participate in the belief model to some extent. Since “reason includes a willingness to believe in the absence of evidence (even belief in the most secure proof requires faith in one’s memory, rational intuition, etc.), reason as such includes a degree of faith.”<sup>78</sup>

I see that the coral tiger lilies are in bloom. I don’t note that I am being appeared to a certain complicated way (that my experience is of a certain complicated character) and then make an argument from my being appeared to in that way to the conclusion that in fact there are coral tiger lilies in bloom there. ... It is rather that upon being appeared to in

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<sup>75</sup> Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. “Faith.”

<sup>76</sup> Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. “Faith.” Perhaps the most famous biblical statement is that “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Heb. 11:1 (KJV). In first-century Greek, “substance” is *hypostasis*, which various translations of the Bible render as “confidence,” “realization,” “certainty,” or “assurance” in this verse. The word for “evidence” is *elenchos*, which is here translated as “conviction,” “assurance,” “evidence,” or “proof.” We will not determine the best translation here. Still, the author of Hebrews means to communicate something uncertain in terms of human, investigational authority and yet trustworthy in terms of revelational authority.

<sup>77</sup> William Lad Sessions, *The Concept of Faith: A Philosophical Investigation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1994), chap. 2.

<sup>78</sup> Rauser, *Theology in Search of Foundations*, 62.

that way (and given my previous training), the belief that the coral tiger lilies are in bloom spontaneously arises in me. This belief will ordinarily be *basic*, in the sense that it is not accepted on the evidential basis of other propositions. The same goes for memory. You ask me what I had for breakfast; I think for a moment and then remember: pancakes with blueberries. I don't argue from the fact that it *seems* to me that I remember having pancakes for breakfast to the conclusion that I did; rather, you ask me what I had for breakfast, and the answer simply comes to mind.<sup>79</sup>

Basic belief in the reliability of memory and perception is not based on argument and evidence in everyday life. The fact that such basic beliefs are uncontroversial does not change the fact that faith is involved. From the point of view of someone sufficiently skeptical, this is faith.

The "attitude model" of faith, type (c), might seem superfluous to science at first:

[this] model makes central a more fundamental and global kind of attitude: a person's basic orientation, interpretation, perspective, or "onlook" toward the world; how the person "takes" or "sees" or "experiences" the world. This attitude essentially generates a "horizon of significance," a kind of prepropositional boundary both between a person and her world and also around them both. A horizon at once divides, unifies, structures, and limits both self and world. Because a horizon-forming attitude is fundamental, totalizing, and significance-engendering, it has all the earmarks of distinctively religious faith.<sup>80</sup>

These words call to mind the Christian: transformed and given a new "horizon of significance."

However, as they pursue nature as an object of knowledge, scientists take an interpretative attitude toward it. E.g., the famous physicist Max Planck argues that

science demands ... the believing spirit. ... Over the entrance to the gates of the temple of science are written the words: *Ye must have faith*. It is a quality which ... scientists cannot dispense with.

The man who handles a bulk of results obtained from an experimental process must have an imaginative picture of the law that he is pursuing. He must embody this in an imaginary hypothesis. The reasoning faculties alone will not help him forward a step, for no order can emerge from that chaos of elements unless there is the constructive quality of mind which builds up the order by a process of elimination and choice. Again and again the imaginary plan on which one attempts to build up that order breaks down[,] and

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<sup>79</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 175–76. Plantinga goes further to develop an epistemological model in which "the beliefs constituting faith are typically taken as basic; that is, they are not accepted by way of argument from other propositions or on the evidential basis of other propositions." *Warranted Christian Belief*, 249–52.

<sup>80</sup> Sessions, *The Concept of Faith: A Philosophical Investigation*, 69.

then we must try another. This imaginative vision and faith in the ultimate success are indispensable. The pure rationalist has no place here.<sup>81</sup>

We can detect notes of faith as hope, resembling type (f), in Planck's words, along with hints of Polanyi's approach in the terms "embodying" and "choice."

Indeed, for Torrance, Polanyi shows us

that in the most rigorous scientific activity[,] the human mind cannot operate outside a framework of beliefs which, though formally unprovable, play an essential role in guiding the thrust of inquiry into the hidden meaning of things. ... [He shows] that scientific activity, and indeed all rational activity, operate with an inner relation between faith and reason similar to that found in Christian theology in its movement of inquiry from faith to understanding.<sup>82</sup>

### 3.2 The Adopted Philosophy of Science

#### 3.2.1 Science as a Knowing Project

Physicist Paul Dirac once said, "philosophy will never lead to important discoveries. It is just a way of talking about discoveries which have already been made."<sup>83</sup> Similarly, "Einstein said that scientists are not, and should not be, driven by any single perspective but should be willing to go wherever experiment dictates and *adopt whatever works*."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Max Planck, *Where Is Science Going?*, trans. James Murphy (New York: W.W. Norton, 1932), 214–15.

<sup>82</sup> Torrance, *Belief in Science*, xvi.

<sup>83</sup> From an interview in Thomas S. Kuhn et al., eds., *Sources for History of Quantum Physics: An Inventory and Report* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1967), n.p., quoted in Mara Beller, *Quantum Dialogue: The Making of a Revolution* (University of Chicago, 2001), 58.

<sup>84</sup> Mano Singham, "The Idea That a Scientific Theory Can Be 'Falsified' Is a Myth," *Scientific American* (blog), September 7, 2020, accessed February 14, 2023, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-idea-that-a-scientific-theory-can-be-falsified-is-a-myth/>.

Singham confirmed by email that he is referring to this passage, especially the italicized sentences in the centre: "The reciprocal relationship of epistemology and science is of noteworthy kind. They are dependent upon each other. Epistemology without contact with science becomes an empty scheme. Science without epistemology is—insofar as it is thinkable at all—primitive and muddled. However, no sooner has the epistemologist, who is seeking a clear system, fought his way through to such a system, than he is inclined to interpret the thought-content of science in the sense of his system and to reject whatever does not fit into his system. *The scientist, however, cannot afford to carry his striving for epistemological systematic that far. He accepts gratefully the epistemological conceptual analysis; but the external conditions, which are set for him by the facts of experience, do not permit him to let himself be too much restricted in the construction of his conceptual world by the adherence to an epistemological system.* He therefore must appear to the systematic epistemologist as a type of unscrupulous opportunist: he appears as [a] *realist* insofar as he seeks to describe a world independent of the acts of perception; as *idealist* insofar as he looks upon the concepts and theories as the free inventions of the human spirit (not logically

At a glance, such statements may appear to reject philosophy altogether, but they can also be understood as congruent with Torrance's conviction: "in rigorous science[,] we pursue inquiry in any field in such a way that we allow the nature of the field or the nature of the object to govern how we know it, think about it, formulate knowledge of it, and how we verify that knowledge."<sup>85</sup> Therefore, philosophy can *aid* the pursuit of a given empirical reality and describe the process after the fact. However, the way of knowing—what may be called a *knowing project*—is governed by the object of knowledge itself.

Relying on Torrance and our discussion above, let us begin with the ultimate object of scientific knowledge—nature—for a knowing project called (natural) science. Instead of a core with an outer layer, let us say that the knowing project takes place *in the light of* its proper object, as depicted in figure 3-2.

Just below nature as an *ultimate* object of knowledge, there are countless *proximate* objects: these are subdivisions of nature on which individual fields of science focus as objects of knowledge, such as plants (botany), animals (zoology), or rocks (petrology). Importantly, they are

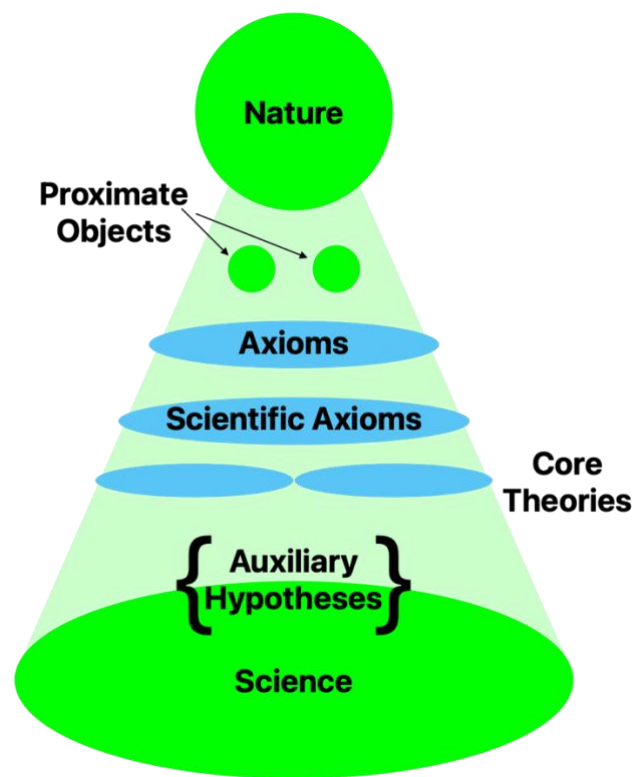


Figure 3-2. Science proceeds in the light of nature.

derivable from what is empirically given); a *positivist* insofar as he considers his concepts and theories justified *only* to the extent to which they furnish a logical representation of relations among sensory experiences. He may even appear as *Platonist* or *Pythagorean* insofar as he considers the viewpoint of logical simplicity as an indispensable and effective tool of his research." Albert Einstein, *Albert Einstein: Philosopher-Scientist*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp, 3rd ed., Library of Living Philosophers, VII (New York: MJF Books, 1970), 683–84; centre emphasis added.

<sup>85</sup> Torrance, *Theological and Natural Science*, 117.

parts of nature—not ontologically separate from it. They are depicted separately for convenience.

Next lies a first-tier lens representing a set of unassailable, non-negotiable beliefs necessary to receive nature as an object of knowledge. These *axioms* include “the existence of a theory-independent” and knowable external world; “the laws of logic”; and “the reliability of our cognitive and sensory faculties to serve as truth gatherers.”<sup>86</sup> We must indwell these axioms *by faith* to learn anything about nature: they are the ‘blind man’s stick’ by which we know nature. To refuse to rely on this ‘stick’ is to avoid faith, but we will fail to know anything about nature.

Beneath axioms, there is a second-tier lens to represent *scientific axioms*. Unlike the first-tier lens, these axioms are broadly negotiable because humanity has not always held to them; nonetheless, they make modern, empirical science possible. E.g., the belief that nature is orderly and worthy of knowing in its own right (*contra* Plato); belief in “the uniformity of nature and induction”;<sup>87</sup> belief in the contingency of nature, which necessitates empirical engagement;<sup>88</sup> and belief in the cultural and moral values of the scientific community.

Next, we have multiple third-tier lenses (only two are depicted) to represent Lakatos’s core theories—one third-tier lens for each research project that takes a proximate object (or a group of proximate objects) as its focus. These core theories are negotiable in principle, but they are pragmatically exempted from falsification during normal science.

In the space below the core theories, there is an even more complicated set of competing lenses (not shown) which could represent various schools of thought and further subdivisions. This is the space in which auxiliary hypotheses may be proposed, tested, and even falsified in the sense described by Venema in chapter 1. When Kuhnian revolutions occur, one third-tier lens

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<sup>86</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 348.

<sup>87</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 348.

<sup>88</sup> Recall Torrance’s study of Alexandrian theologians, discussed in § 2.3.3.1.

(e.g., Newtonian mechanics) is displaced (in the Lakatosian sense) by another (general relativity) that provides a more fruitful view of that field's proximate object(s) (space, time, gravity, etc.) in a broader range of relevance.

Finally, the overall *knowing project* of science results from nature's 'light' as received through these many lenses. At no point can science operate without lenses at all tiers, for no scientist can (a) step outside his first-tier beliefs, (b) dispense with empirical engagement,<sup>89</sup> or (c) hold at bay *all* his field's theories simultaneously.<sup>90</sup>

### 3.3 A Knowing Project for Each Object

#### 3.3.1 *Theology as a Knowing Project*

Let us extend the nature-revelation analogy to become a full science-theology analogy. Alongside our depiction of science, we may place a similar one for theology (figure 3-3). In place of nature, revelation is the ultimate object; just below, we have proximate objects for areas of specific theological study to focus on. In place of axioms, we have a first-tier lens for the general faith that God "exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."<sup>91</sup>

Christian theology's second-tier lens is the Rule of Faith—the core, essential teachings of the Christian faith.<sup>92</sup> Next, we have a lens for each major stream of the Christian faith (Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestantism, etc.). Beneath the third-tier lenses, there would be

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<sup>89</sup> Or dispense with the fruit of such engagement conducted by others.

<sup>90</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1997), sec. 38. Readers may notice that figure 3-2 is far better suited to the hard sciences (physics, chemistry, biology, etc.) than the soft sciences (psychology, sociology, etc.). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to flesh this out: to properly depict psychology, we would need to have both nature and person(s) as proper objects, and science would proceed in the light of *both* nature and person(s) in the area where the knowing projects overlap.

<sup>91</sup> Heb. 11:6 (NIV). See the final paragraph of § 4.2.2 for commentary.

<sup>92</sup> "Long before the apostles' or ecumenical creeds, we find the regulating function of the Rule of faith in the churches, expounding the cardinal points of theology which evangelical Christians still believe and confess to this day." It "was not a creed, nor a formula, but an abbreviated body of doctrine wherein the genuine articles of Christianity were articulated." Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism*, 87–88.

subordinate lenses (not shown) for competing denominational emphases and schools of thought (especially for Protestantism). This space contains both theories about major doctrines and comparatively minor doctrines—important but not core to the Christian faith.

E.g., the *theological reality* of the Atonement—Jesus’s atonement for our sins—would be a proximate object: *something* happened on the cross. The Rule of Faith lens affirms this reality *by faith* in general terms, providing the core doctrine of the *fact* of the Atonement: Jesus died for our sins to reconcile us to God. Each major stream of the Christian faith appropriates the core doctrine differently, generating minor doctrines and theories about it. One group of Protestants might hold to a *penal substitutionary* theory while a group of Catholics believes in *Christus Victor*. Importantly, criticisms of these theories do not accrue to the core doctrine—much less to the theological reality (i.e., proximate object) itself.

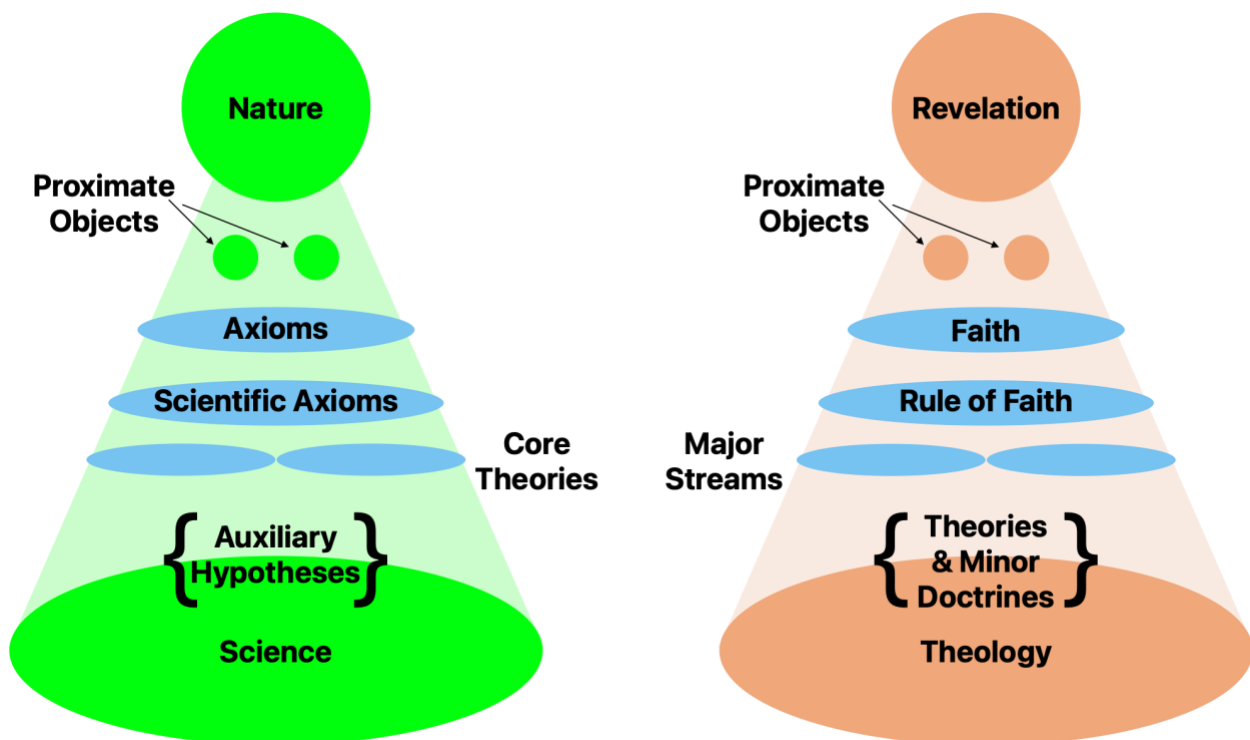


Figure 3-3. Science and theology as ways of knowing their respective, ultimate objects: nature and revelation.

### 3.3.2 *Objections Roundup 4*

Now that we have a sketch of science and theology as knowing projects, or *disciplines*, we may revisit the skeptic's accusations—particularly those that directly compare science with the Christian faith. Many flaws in the dishonesty objection come to light when the knowing projects of science and theology are properly *aligned*.

#### 3.3.2.1 Correction and Self-Criticism

The skeptic calls the Christian faith intellectually dishonest because it neither accepts nor seeks faith-falsifying evidence; he compares this to scientific theories, emphasizing that scientists seek to disconfirm them. However, this criticism is *misaligned*: the skeptic compares science's lower-tier components (normal science's auxiliary hypotheses) to theology's upper-tier components. As we have already explored with the nature-revelation analogy, scientists are *rightly* neither open to evidence to disconfirm the existence of nature nor do they seek it. Coyne may insist that “what cannot be refuted cannot be accepted as true”,<sup>93</sup> however, *for both science and theology, encounter with the discipline's respective ultimate object is its own proof. Any knowledge to be had occurs downstream from accepting it.*

This criticism also fails to appreciate science and theology as distinct modalities of reason: it assumes that theology aims solely at nature as a source of knowledge.<sup>94</sup> For both science and theology, *each knowing project is self-critical with respect to its own proper object.* In each discipline, we come to knowledge by humbling ourselves before the object in question, setting aside our pretensions and preconceptions, thereby allowing it to set the terms for

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<sup>93</sup> Coyne, *Faith versus Fact*, 259–60.

<sup>94</sup> Certain branches of theology, such as theology of nature (an interdisciplinary situation not depicted in figure 3-3), may consider information from nature by considering nature as God's creation and therefore revelatory to some degree. Regardless, the proper object of theology is revelation itself.

exploration, discovery, correction, etc.<sup>95</sup> For theology, that object is divine revelation; the scientific community might appear just as opposed to self-criticism and correction if we were to cross the modalities and demand, e.g., that science look up to the Bible as a scientific text.

Christian faith is openly self-critical in the light of revelation. As Barth puts it, “evangelical theology is an eminently *critical* science, for it is continually exposed to judgment and never relieved of the crisis in which it is placed by its object, or, rather to say, by its living subject.”<sup>96</sup> Throughout church history, Christian thinkers, *at their best*, have striven to develop and criticize their theology before the canons of theological authority.<sup>97</sup> The sixteenth-century Anabaptist leader Balthasar Hübmaier expresses such an attitude:

Dear devout Christians, this is my conviction which I have learned from the Scriptures, namely, about images and the mass. Wherein my teaching is not right and Christian[,] I ask you all through Jesus Christ, our only Savior, I ask and beseech you, to correct my judgment in a brotherly and Christian way with the Scriptures. *I may err, I am a man; but a heretic I cannot be. I will (and desire from my heart) receive correction* and give many thanks to those who make known my error for I will follow God’s Word willingly[,] and in all obedience[,] come under its judgment for you and all of us to be truly Christ’s disciples and follow after Him.<sup>98</sup>

The ecumenical councils were convened to work out disputes concerning received teaching.<sup>99</sup>

When properly understood, theology can even be said to make discoveries:

No discovery is properly called such unless it takes a logical leap beyond the data it has at hand, being enabled, by its indwelling in the data, to perceive a rational pattern that is really there but has not previously been discerned. Thus might [the Council of] Chalcedon be seen to be an attempt to *look through* the data provided by (i) the New Testament witness to the divine-human interrelation with history, (ii) the worship of the Christian community and (iii) the tradition’s rational indwelling in both (i) and (ii), *to* the truth about Jesus Christ. The Dogmatic Formula of Chalcedon is a statement of high

<sup>95</sup> Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, chap. 1; Torrance, *Theological and Natural Science*, 92.

<sup>96</sup> Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 10.

<sup>97</sup> However we might understand these—Scripture, tradition, spiritual experience—they are understood to be authoritative *by virtue of God’s own authority*, given to the church in revelation.

<sup>98</sup> Melchior Schuler and Johann Schulthess, eds., *Huldreich Zwingli’s Werke* (Zürich: Friedrich Schulthess, 1828), 459–540, translated in William Roscoe Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 81–82; emphasis added.

<sup>99</sup> E.g., Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day* (Peabody, MA: Prince, 2009), chap. 17.

scientific precision, condensing into a few sentences that which may be believed about Jesus Christ, and thus presenting in a form that is at once personal and scientific a claim for the truth of Christianity.<sup>100</sup>

Importantly, theology makes theological discoveries, not scientific ones. The Protestant Reformation is akin to a paradigm shift within the bounds of orthodoxy. More generally, it is widely considered a virtue in evangelical churches for everyone to learn Scripture well enough to critique teaching from the pulpit competently.

Although science may not *dictate* theology (no more than theology may dictate science), science has often prompted Christian thinkers to take a fresh look at Scripture on its own terms, aiding in the “genre calibration” for biblical texts.<sup>101</sup> For Barth, biblical theology “must conscientiously employ *all known and available means*, all the rules and criteria that are applicable to grammar, linguistics, and style, as well as all the knowledge gathered in the comparative study of the history of the world, of culture, and of literature.”<sup>102</sup> Alongside archaeology, linguistics, and studies of ancient cultures, science can help determine meanings of biblical texts.<sup>103</sup> E.g., suppose science strongly indicates that the earth is much more than six thousand years old. In that case, this may *suggest* to the Christian that the early chapters of Genesis are not intended to convey history (or science) according to modern standards. Still, she must attend to the proper object of theology: she must attend to Scripture itself to see whether the

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<sup>100</sup> Colin E. Gunton, “The Truth of Christology,” in *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi’s Thought for Christian Faith and Life*, ed. Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1980), 105. Gunton uses science in the broader sense here, similar to Barth.

<sup>101</sup> Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn’t Say About Human Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2012), 35.

<sup>102</sup> Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 176; emphasis added.

<sup>103</sup> One difference is that while archaeology, linguistics, etc. act ‘positively’ to *supply* possible meanings, science helps in a ‘negative’ sense to *rule out* possible readings. Readers should not expect to find twenty-first century science in the Bible—nor should they give too much place to science in hermeneutics: Yes, science provides positive evidence for an ancient earth by robust, mutually-confirming lines of evidence concerning *normally occurring* natural processes; No, science does not show that resurrections (or any other miracle) cannot happen—only that they do not *normally* happen.

early chapters of Genesis *teach* a physical history of nature.<sup>104</sup> Science cannot proceed independently of nature, and theology cannot proceed independently of revelation.

Finally, without repeating our treatment of falsification above (§ 3.1), we may note that various minor doctrines and theories may indeed be falsified *with respect to* higher-tier lenses and revelation itself (e.g., Arianism, ‘biblical’ arguments for slavery, etc.). The major streams of Christianity are perhaps not *just as* vulnerable to falsification (or displacement) as the core theories of science. E.g., it is unlikely that Protestantism could be displaced in the way quantum mechanics displaced Newtonian physics in the realm of the very small; however, the pace of theology is not nearly so quick as science, and church history may yet be in its infancy. In any case, there is nothing intellectually dishonest about theology being oriented to its proper object.

### 3.3.2.2 The Flow of Authority

For both ways of knowing, the flow of authority is top-down. Each level may correct the level below it, and at the top (including proximate objects), no correction is possible: science cannot correct nature, and theology cannot correct revelation. It follows that *one’s authority is proportional to one’s acquaintance or intimacy with the object of knowledge*. A quantum physicist has more authority to speak about the nature of electrons than a general physicist, who has more authority than an electrical engineer, who has more authority on the matter than an electrician, who is more authoritative than a layperson.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> John H. Walton, e.g., approaches Scripture on its own terms and concludes that Genesis is not intended to address material origins. *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009).

<sup>105</sup> Regarding vaccines, something similar can be said for immunologists, general biologists, medical doctors, and nurses, respectively. Importantly, this is where the knowing project is *science*. The flow of authority would run in reverse if the object of knowledge were taken to be *practical application of science*, of course: quantum physicists do not often fish wires through finished walls, and immunologists may not be able to find a vein with ease.

Sometimes the scientific community must use its authority to speak out against bad science, pseudoscience, and false claims—especially doubt-mongering. During the 1970s, the tobacco industry aimed to “fight science with science—or at least with the gaps and uncertainties in existing science, and with scientific research that could be used to deflect attention from the main event.”<sup>106</sup> Rather than seek the proper object of science, the defenders of big tobacco sought profits, and it was up to scientists to expose these false teachers. Later, “the same people who had questioned acid rain, doubted the ozone hole, and defended tobacco now attacked the scientific evidence of global warming.”<sup>107</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has also required scientists to address misconceptions, fears, and false claims about masks and vaccines.<sup>108</sup> According to Hübmaier, the distinguishing mark of a theological heretic is that after being corrected by authority, she persists in her views anyway. A ‘scientific heretic’ persists in his erroneous belief after it has been rejected by peer review. Thus, there is a crucial difference between (a) the minority scientist ahead of his time and challenging an existing paradigm, such as Einstein, and (b) a minority scientist who persists in his falsified idea, theory, or displaced paradigm. Einstein saw ahead because he paid even greater attention to the authority of nature. He saw what others would soon see. But the scientific heretic looks backward, refusing to see what others have already seen; he is not trying to know nature so much as he is holding onto an erroneous view.

The skeptic accuses the Christian faith of being self-defensive; however, even science must defend itself against false teaching: scientists have both the authority and the responsibility

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<sup>106</sup> Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, 13.

<sup>107</sup> Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, 168.

<sup>108</sup> E.g., Rebecca Dielschneider, “Vaccine Hesitancy: Christian Reasons and Responses,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 73, no. 1 (March 2021), <https://doi.org/10.56315/PSCF3-21Dielschneider>. Members of the American Scientific Affiliation have given several public talks on COVID-19 to this end: “ASA Response to COVID-19,” American Scientific Affiliation, last modified November 26, 2022, accessed February 23, 2023, <https://network.asa3.org/page/covid-19>.

to do so. There is nothing intellectually dishonest about it. Responsible scientists do not encourage the public to personally question *all the way down* whether climate science is worthy of assent.<sup>109</sup> Some voices *must* be exposed as lying, clouding the truth, committing the false balance fallacy, etc.<sup>110</sup> The skeptic would not consider it to be an example of the genetic fallacy if an immunologist warned against heeding scientific heretics who abuse their authority to stoke doubts about masks and vaccines during a deadly pandemic; rather, the skeptic might readily agree: “do not receive him into your house.”<sup>111</sup>

For Christianity, those most acquainted with God’s revelation have a similar responsibility to warn against false teaching—especially Jesus’ apostles and the authors of the New Testament. The skeptic accuses these authors of committing the genetic and *ad hominem* fallacies, but this is to deny that they are writing with authority in the first place. If they write with authority, their warnings are sensible, not intellectually dishonest.

Coyne’s inability to rule out trickster aliens prevents him from thinking he could embrace Christianity even if given overwhelming evidence. The title of Dawkins’s famous book alone suggests that the only form of Christian faith acceptable to him would exclude the possibility of delusion. To eliminate the possibility that Christianity is a delusion, such skeptics insist on an impossible form of ‘evidence’ that begs the question in favour of skepticism—an attempt to define divine authority into an ‘epistemologically *vulnerable zone*’ (pseudo-theology).

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<sup>109</sup> If anything, the public is asked to put *more* faith in science than the Christian asked to put in her pastor’s preaching: at least she is encouraged to check it against Scripture—but we will discuss differences in chapter 4.

<sup>110</sup> The fallacy of false balance is a patent example of strong intellectual dishonesty, wherein two competing views are presented to the public as though they are of equal merit when, in truth, one is rejected by almost everyone in the field. This happens with climate science but also with matters of faith. E.g., most biblical scholars and historians strongly reject *Jesus mythicism* (the idea that no such human existed at all), but this is sometimes presented as though the situation is a ‘fifty-fifty’ in terms of probability.

<sup>111</sup> 2. John 1:10.

By considering these criticisms alongside the *flow of authority* for the two knowing projects at hand, we can see that, in general, *insisting on invulnerability to being tricked leads away from knowledge*: it leads skeptics of science to pseudoscience, skeptics of our senses to solipsism, skeptics of the gospel to pseudo-theology, and skeptics of God to atheism. They are “so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out.”<sup>112</sup>

### 3.3.2.3 Incentives to Be Intellectually Dishonest

The skeptic says that Christians are incentivized toward intellectual dishonesty, unlike scientists. First, we are considering Christianity *at its best*; one could similarly claim, e.g., that climate scientists are only in it for the money,<sup>113</sup> or are part of a conspiracy—as skeptics of science often do. Second, from a Christian perspective, a reward in heaven provides an incentive to love the truth.<sup>114</sup> Third, the skeptic only mentions incentives in the present-day West, but other contexts, such as persecution, provide strong incentives to renounce the faith. Fourth, communicating science to the public involves a modicum of political self-interest, which should not be counted against science itself. While one cannot rule out the self-interest of a preacher completely, it does not necessarily say anything about her intellectual honesty.

### 3.3.2.4 Intellectual Humility

Perhaps the skeptic’s most challenging accusation is that the Christian holds and preaches her faith in a non-provisional manner, going beyond the evidence. This concerns the uniqueness of theology’s object, as the following chapter makes clear. However, so long as we are

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<sup>112</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, The Chronicles of Narnia 7 (New York: HarperTrophy, 1956), 169.

<sup>113</sup> For a fun counterexample, see Katharine Hayhoe, “Climate Change, That’s Just a Money Grab by Scientist... Right?,” November 22, 2017, video, 7:28, <https://youtu.be/Iq8Jo9QN0qA>.

<sup>114</sup> 2 Thess. 2:10. Scripture indicates that a person who is oriented to truth would love the truth so as not to be deceived, resisting the temptation to cherry-pick teachers to play into one’s confirmation bias—what their “itching ears want to hear” 2 Tim. 4:3 (NIV). Proverbs likewise holds intellectual humility in high regard (18:13, 17).

considering science and theology as ‘parallel’ knowing projects from the human, or creaturely, side of things, there are several observations the Christian can make in response to the skeptic.

First, intellectual honesty cannot mean “refraining from commitments.” The skeptic and Christian share many (ostensibly) ‘secular’ convictions in a non-provisional sense, such as the equal worth of all humans. The skeptic is correct that there are always epistemological limits, science is never final, etc. Still, we may presume he would eagerly “leap over the probabilities” and join the Christian in *preaching* a permanent, non-provisional condemnation of scientific racism,<sup>115</sup> e.g., and that he would not find it intellectually dishonest.

Second, scientific theories may be provisional, but it is hard to see in what sense the scientist holds to the axioms described above provisionally. The skeptic himself is not meaningfully provisional regarding the external world. If the Christian alone is expected to keep commitments at bay, the skeptic holds her to a higher standard than he is willing to meet. It is more sensible to say that the lower-tier components of both knowing projects are provisional with respect to the upper-tier ones, which are far less provisional, if at all.

Third, the truth is that scientists don’t hold to their theories in exact proportion to the evidence they have. As Polanyi explains, they reach a point where they are *confident enough* in a theory or paradigm to responsibly commit to it. In Lakatosian terms, scientists intentionally exempt hard-core theories from falsification so long as they are able.

Fourth, returning to authority, the Scripture describes Jesus Christ as God’s authentic, authoritative revelation.<sup>116</sup> To respond by insisting on a *provisional*, legitimate, transcendent, authoritative revelation is a contradiction in terms, which effectively denies revelation in the first

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<sup>115</sup> “Scientific racism is an organized system of misusing science to promote false scientific beliefs in which dominant racial and ethnic groups are perceived as being superior.” “Scientific Racism,” National Human Genome Research Institute, accessed December 8, 2022, <https://www.genome.gov/genetics-glossary/Scientific-Racism>.

<sup>116</sup> Heb. 1:1-4.

place. Similarly, pseudoscience gives the appearance of rationality but refuses to relate appropriately to nature and scientific authority.

### **3.4 Summary and Next Steps**

To further address the skeptic's accusations, this chapter has compared science and theology as ways of knowing. The role of falsification has been overemphasized in science and rationality, and faith plays a role in both. Drawing on both philosophers of science and theologians, we can depict a philosophy of science alongside a parallel depiction of theology. Each project radically depends on its own proper object: science has nature, and theology has revelation, with many essential lenses in between. When our understanding of these projects is properly aligned, several of the skeptic's criticisms about correction, self-criticism, self-defence, incentives, and intellectual humility break down. To expose pseudoscience, scientists must attend to the natural world itself; to expose the pseudo-theology asserted by the skeptic, we must now attend more deeply to the proper object of theology.

## Chapter 4

### Revelation as a Unique Object of Knowledge

The discussion above may be compared to a trial where the defendant is accused of intellectual dishonesty. The skeptical prosecutor has made his case in its strongest form. The judge has admonished the jury to strive for impartiality—to see the matter from the defendant’s perspective. As her lawyer, I’ve appealed to whatever common ground I can muster to create a space for reasonable doubt about my client’s guilt; I have invited the jury to hypothetically set aside the skeptic’s pseudo-theological demands, such as a super-god’s eye view and an observable, testable ‘revelation’ devoid of authority. I now call the defendant herself to testify. She does not speak in hypotheticals ‘from the outside.’ She speaks for herself, downstream from an ongoing, transformative encounter. *She speaks as a Christian.*

*Objection! The defendant’s testimony must be vulnerable to human criticism, on human terms, on pain of intellectual dishonesty.*

*Overruled. The prosecution will refrain from demanding that the Christian defend her Christianity by ceasing to be a Christian.*

To think that any response to the dishonesty objection must be assailable by human reason begs the question: it assumes that human reason is the ultimate bar of authority. This is “a form of confirmation bias where the very act of [insisting on neutrality] means [the skeptic has] already bought back into the system.”<sup>1</sup> For the Christian to meet the skeptic’s terms, her ‘faith’ would have to be nothing more than a species of trust in her own reason.<sup>2</sup> Without further apology, *this chapter leans into theology*, emphasizing how science and theology differ.

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<sup>1</sup> Pace Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 126. This, too, expresses the problem of position.

<sup>2</sup> It is well beyond the scope of this thesis to fully articulate and defend a particular view of faith and reason. Still, it is worthwhile to explain the chosen view. Historically speaking, the Christian faith has three broad options: (a) reason precedes faith (Aquinas), (b) faith precedes reason (Augustine), or (c) “faith and reason do not support one another. Hence one believes virtually in spite of reason” (Tertullian, fideism). As depicted in figure 3-3, this thesis

## 4.1 Theology Is More Constrained Than Science

At most, the nature-revelation analogy must be understood as a helpful way of modelling the perspective and cognition of the human knower—it is not an ontological claim.<sup>3</sup> While science and theology have ‘parallel’ similarities as knowing projects, several ‘perpendicular’ differences are revealed when we attend to the uniqueness of theology’s proper object and the position of the Christian before it. In the first place, theology is far more constrained than science because of the uniqueness of its object. *At its best*, theology must grapple with the obstacles of sin and finitude for knowing God—obstacles largely irrelevant to science *at its best*.

### 4.1.1 A Universal Encounter?

Theological truth “is not known except through an interior change brought about by the Spirit of God,”<sup>4</sup> but Christian thinkers have long disagreed about how this works vis-à-vis human free will. For the Calvinist, God inscrutably withholds his self-authenticating encounter from a segment of humanity. For the Arminian, this encounter is freely available to all but only experienced by those who seek it. Whether by choice or design, we will not dwell on this perennial debate here. At a minimum, we can say humanity’s encounter with revelation does not have the same universal, ‘obvious’ quality that our encounter with nature does: agreement on nature far exceeds our agreement on God. This constraint makes theological knowledge far less ‘democratic’ than scientific knowledge, only furthering the problem of position. “Any person can know purely factual truth, but only the redeemed can know truth that liberates and empowers.”<sup>5</sup>

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takes an Augustinian view of both science *and* theology. “Faith precedes reason, but [it] makes reason possible. From the perspective of faith, understanding can emerge.” Robert W. Lyon, “Faith,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 764.

<sup>3</sup> See Archie J. Spencer, *The Analogy of Faith: The Quest for God’s Speakability* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 301.

<sup>5</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 284.

#### 4.1.2 *Epistemological Inversion*

We have discussed how Torrance's *kata-physin* principle necessitates “a radical change in our knowing” when we seek to know God.<sup>6</sup> This entails a significant difference between science and theology: the degree of authority or ‘licence’ of the human knower. The object of knowledge has authority in both disciplines: only God may reveal God; only nature has authority (delegated by God) to reveal nature. Having been delegated investigational authority, we may prod nature at our whim—experiments may be done on our terms and schedules. With other persons, this is significantly curtailed: “if I’m always setting little traps to see whether you’re my friend, ... I’ll destroy the possibility of real friendship between us by the distrust I display.”<sup>7</sup> The difference is even more accentuated when knowing God:

[for] an impersonal object or a personal being, our relationship with it is on the same creaturely level (although as observers or knowers[,] we may well occupy a logical level above it), but where the objective pole is God the Creator[,] our relationship to him can only be one of reverence in which we look up, and not across or down.<sup>8</sup>

This is Torrance's *epistemological inversion*. “We can know [God] ... only in the mode of worship, prayer, and adoration in which we respond personally, humbly, and obediently to his divine initiative.”<sup>9</sup> Whereas science has the licence to interrogate its object repeatedly, theology confesses that “it always rests with God and not with us whether our hearing is real hearing and our obedience real obedience, whether our dogmatics is blessed and sanctified as knowledge of the true content of Christian utterance or whether it is idle speculation.”<sup>10</sup> Christian faith is “an empty vessel that receives, not ... a criterion that judges and controls.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Torrance, *Theological and Natural Science*, 92.

<sup>7</sup> John Polkinghorne, *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity: Questions to Science and Religion*, rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 22.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, “The Framework of Belief,” in *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi's Thought for Christian Faith and Life*, ed. Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1980), 13.

<sup>9</sup> Torrance, *Theological and Natural Science*, 92.

<sup>10</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:18.

<sup>11</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 292.

### 4.1.3 *The Noetic Effects of Sin*

We have already covered the impossibility of a neutral arena in which one might assess the Christian's intellectual honesty on largely theoretical grounds. When we allow Christian theology to speak to this issue, such a prospect is further exposed as hopeless because of human sinfulness. Individual scientists might sin in terms of pride, selfishness, fraud, or intellectual dishonesty, but these are not enduring obstacles between the scientist and nature. For theology, the human knower has the added disadvantage of being estranged from God, an infirmity that significantly hinders the proper reception of revelation. Although this thesis does not take a presuppositionalist perspective, it is worth noting "two important strengths in presuppositionalism, especially in its milder forms":

First, this method is correct in stressing the impact of a world view on a person's apprehension of truth. This fits with the results of holistic philosophy of science. Facts do not always speak for themselves. Observers must attune themselves to nature to receive its broadcast. Second, spiritual blinkers also influence human knowledge. Presuppositionalism rightly recognizes the noetic effects of sin.<sup>12</sup>

The *noetic effects of sin* are the effects that human sinfulness—estrangement from God—has on the mind, resulting in "a condition that involves both intellect and will. It is an affective malaise, a malfunction or madness of the will. But it is also a cognitive condition," affecting "our knowledge of other people, of ourselves, and of God." The noetic effects of sin "are less relevant ... to our knowledge of nature and the world."<sup>13</sup> For Plantinga, sin affects how we deal with revelational authority much more than how we handle investigational authority:

The most serious noetic effects of sin have to do with our knowledge of God. Were it not for sin and its effects, God's presence and glory would be as obvious and uncontroversial to us all as the presence of other minds, physical objects, and the past. Like any cognitive

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<sup>12</sup> Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics*, 106.

<sup>13</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 213. It might be thought that one could 'sin' against nature by trying to expound nature's reality without submitting one's theories to nature, i.e., without willingness to 'repent' of one's theory and 'believe' what nature reveals about itself through empirical investigation. Nonetheless, nature does not have moral authority over humanity.

process, however, the *sensus divinitatis* can malfunction; as a result of sin, it has indeed been damaged.<sup>14</sup>

The idea of a *sensus divinitatis* (sense of divinity) was set forth by the sixteenth-century Reformation theologian John Calvin:

That there exists in the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges, that all to a man being aware that there is a God, and that he is their Maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service.<sup>15</sup>

Theologians disagree on the *sensus* across traditions, even within the Reformed tradition that follows Calvin.<sup>16</sup> Barth is very reserved about the *sensus*, outright rejecting it in his early work,<sup>17</sup> if not all his work. However, it is an integral part of Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*: the *sensus* is damaged by sin, but the "internal instigation of the Holy Spirit" overcomes this damage.<sup>18</sup> "For Barth, it is not merely fallenness that the Holy Spirit must overcome, but human finitude as such"; it is "a problem of nature, not [only] sin":<sup>19</sup> even without sin, humanity would not know God's presence and glory without his accommodating human finitude.

<sup>14</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 214.

<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 1:3.1.

<sup>16</sup> Kevin Diller, *Theology's Epistemological Dilemma: How Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga Provide a Unified Response* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 216–22, chap. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn Clement Hoskyns (London: Oxford University, 1968).

<sup>18</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 243–44.

<sup>19</sup> S. Joel Garver, "Review of *Theology's Epistemological Dilemma: How Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga Provide a Unified Response*," Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews, last modified June 8, 2015, accessed February 25, 2023, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/theology-s-epistemological-dilemma-how-karl-barth-and-alvin-plantinga-provide-a-unified-response/>. "As a Christian theologian, Barth is attempting to reflect the inner priorities of Christian theology and emphasize those priorities over against critical areas of potential distortion. It would be antithetical to Barth's task if he were to highlight the virtues of our epistemological gifts without also emphasizing their utter inadequacy. They are powerless outside of God's giving of himself to be known and his decision to involve our faculties in his self-revealing. Plantinga's purposes are considerably different. He operates as a Christian philosopher with the particular goal of defending the possibility that belief could have warrant without reposing on an argument or demonstrable evidence. Plantinga's models are intentionally theologically minimalist. Though they are intended to be faithful to Christian theology, they make no pretenses of being comprehensive theological accounts." Diller, *Theology's Epistemological Dilemma*, 218.

To emphasize the problem of position and the need for faith in science and Christianity, the preceding chapters side with Barth over Plantinga by stressing human finitude: the Creator-creature distinction, the top-down nature of authority, the futility of objectivism, and especially our inability to “check our beliefs against reality and find out, once and for all, whether they *are* true.”<sup>20</sup> Still, both thinkers agree that sin affects the intellect, inhibiting right belief about God—a conviction broadly common to non-liberal Protestantism, Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4.1.4 *We Are Not Objective, Innocent Explorers*

Scripture warns that humans are easily tricked by their own hearts and desires:<sup>22</sup> “the desire for knowledge is there, but so is the desire to hide from ... [its] implications.”<sup>23</sup> It is not enough to state, in clinical fashion, that there is an estrangement between the human knower and the object of theology. Missionary and theologian Lesslie Newbigin stresses this point: theological liberalism, which at least *downplays* the noetic effects of sin and estrangement from God (if not rejecting the notion altogether), “challeng[es] us to be open to new truth, to be fearless in exploring all reality and to be humble in recognizing the vastness and mystery that we try to comprehend with our finite minds.”<sup>24</sup> This may sound entirely in accord with everything argued so far, but Newbigin senses a fundamental flaw:

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<sup>20</sup> Grene, *A Philosophical Testament*, 17. I’ve chosen this path not only because I find it more convincing but because it is arguably tougher to respond to the skeptic from this perspective—in a sense, choosing this more difficult path helps to steel-man the dishonesty objection.

<sup>21</sup> Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), sec. 407; St. Athanasius Orthodox Academy, ed., *The Orthodox Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 1–2; Craig Truglia, “The Orthodox Doctrine of Original Sin: A Comprehensive Treatment,” *Orthodox Christian Theology* (blog), April 11, 2021, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://orthodoxchristiantheology.com/2021/04/11/the-orthodox-doctrine-of-original-sin-a-comprehensive-treatment/>.

<sup>22</sup> Jer. 17:9; Mark 7:20–22; Rom. 1:18; 2 Cor. 4:4.

<sup>23</sup> James W. Sire, *Habits of the Mind: Intellectual Life as a Christian Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2000), 91.

<sup>24</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 103–4.

The error is the supposition that it is we who are the explorers, that the real questions are the ones we formulate and put to the universe, and that our minds have a sovereign freedom to explore a reality waiting to be discovered. Our peril is that, out of the vastness of the unplumbed mystery, we summon up images that are the creations of our own minds. The human heart, as Calvin said, is a factory of idols.<sup>25</sup>

The modern temptation is to “picture ... ourselves as sovereign explorers who formulate the real questions in a search for a yet-to-be-discovered reality.”<sup>26</sup> Not unlike the crew of the *U.S.S. Enterprise 1701-D*, we will set the terms for inquiry. We might encounter vastly more powerful beings, perhaps even benevolent ones. Still, we know the plot in advance: we are the *good guys*, and any ostensibly omnipotent, authoritative being we encounter is a trickster—a more powerful creature unworthy of worship and obedience.<sup>27</sup> There may be higher powers than humanity but no legitimately higher authorities. We can meet the universe’s challenges with hard work, a humanist ethic, and technology. And yet,

the gospel undermines our questions with a question that comes to us from the mystery we thought to explore. It is a question as piercing and shattering as the voice that spoke to Job out of the whirlwind. It exposes our false pretensions. We are *not* honest and open-minded explorers of reality; we are alienated from reality because we have made ourselves the center of the universe.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4.1.5 A More Critical Realism

As we have discussed, science and theology both rely on ongoing, self-critical scrutiny in the light of their respective objects. Drawing on the work of Polanyi, Kuhn, Lakatos, and others, science-religion scholar Ian G. Barbour develops “critical realism”:<sup>29</sup> an alternative to both (a) science as being a perfect mirror of nature (naïve realism) and (b) science as being merely a

<sup>25</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 104.

<sup>26</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 104.

<sup>27</sup> E.g., the being(s) called “Q.” *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, “Encounter at Farpoint,” season 1, episodes 1-2, directed by Corey Allan, written by D. C. Fontana and Gene Roddenberry, featuring Patrick Stewart and John de Lancie, aired September 28, 1987, first-run syndication, Paramount Television.

<sup>28</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 104.

<sup>29</sup> Ian G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971), 156–71, 248.

useful description.<sup>30</sup> “Scientific theories yield partial, revisable, and abstract knowledge of the world”; they are “expressed through ‘metaphor’ – open-ended analogies whose meaning cannot be reduced to, or replaced by, a set of literal statements – and through their systematic development into models.”<sup>31</sup> Theology also uses human language to model divine realities (e.g., Christ as having two natures in one person), so it must also be critically realistic in recognizing that the fullness of the divine reality is not exhausted in human language.

The critical realism of theology must be more self-critical than that of science in several ways. First, serious theology is self-critical partly because of human sin and rebellion against God. It is possible to participate in science *at its best* without accepting physical realism; this is not unlike being excellent at a videogame that requires critical thinking and problem-solving. It is at least thinkable for a solipsist like Sam to be a *best* friend to Rae the realist; still, it is difficult to imagine—especially regarding respect for her boundaries or putting her needs ahead of his own. Shifting the modality of reason to God, however, it is impossible to do Christian theology *at its best* while doubting whether God exists.<sup>32</sup>

I do not mean to say skeptics cannot do theology in the broader academic sense. Nothing prevents a skeptic from academic excellence in the philosophy of religion, general theology, or even a study of Christian theology.<sup>33</sup> However, there is a difference between describing and doing. In its most basic and proper form, Barth emphasizes that Christian theology is a response to God’s personal address in Jesus Christ:

Human thought and speech cannot be *about* God, but must be directed *toward* God, called into action by the divine thought and speech directed to men, and following and

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<sup>30</sup> E.g., Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1977).

<sup>31</sup> Robert John Russell and Kirk Wegter-McNelly, “Science,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, ed. Gareth Jones, Blackwell Companions to Religion (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 513–14.

<sup>32</sup> The *kata-physin* approach to theology cannot work “despite oneself” as it can in science. Double-mindedness might work in science, but not in theology (cf. James 1:6-8).

<sup>33</sup> E.g., in 2016, I had the pleasure of conversing with Donald Wiebe at Trinity College, University of Toronto.

corresponding to this work of God. Human thought and speech would certainly be false if they bound themselves to a divine “It” or “something,” since God is a person and not a thing. But human thought and speech concerning God could also be false and would at any rate be unreal if they related themselves to him in the *third* person. What is essential for human language is to speak of men in the first person and of God in the *second* person. True and proper language concerning God will always be a response to God, which overtly or covertly, explicitly or implicitly, thinks and speaks of God exclusively in the second person. And this means that theological work must really and truly take place in the form of a liturgical act, as invocation of God, and as prayer.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, not all Christian thinkers take the same view of philosophizing about God. For apologists such as Craig and Moreland, “two controls” guide “inquiry into the divine nature: Scripture and perfect being theology”:<sup>35</sup>

the Anselmian conception of God as the greatest conceivable being or most perfect being ... [may guide] philosophical speculation on the raw data of Scripture, so that God’s biblical attributes are to be conceived in ways that would serve to exalt God’s greatness. Since the concept of God is underdetermined by the biblical data and since what constitutes a “great-making” property is to some degree debatable, philosophers working within the Judeo-Christian tradition enjoy considerable latitude in formulating a philosophically coherent and biblically faithful doctrine of God.<sup>36</sup>

We cannot dwell on this debate, but neither do we need to do so: both sides agree that receiving revelation *as revelation* is critical.

Second, whereas science “operate[s] with ‘picturing models’ built up from observational phenomena” and humanly-constructed metaphors, the Holy Spirit inspires theology’s “disclosure models”:<sup>37</sup> the Church is not permitted to move on from them.<sup>38</sup> Science can gauge the success of its models and research programs,<sup>39</sup> but in theology, gauging success requires reflection within the Church and “constant dialogue with the past”;<sup>40</sup> ultimately, it rests with God. Third, and most importantly, while scientific critical realism is an epistemological “response to and

<sup>34</sup> Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 164.

<sup>35</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 501.

<sup>36</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 501.

<sup>37</sup> Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 255.

<sup>38</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Science and Religion: An Introduction*, 164.

<sup>39</sup> For instance, we can judge whether a Lakatosian research program is active or stagnant.

<sup>40</sup> John Polkinghorne, *Faith, Science and Understanding* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2000), 39.

interpretation of the history of science and the explanatory power of scientific discovery,” theology’s “critical realism is a response to and interpretation of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ ..., as an implication of God’s self-revelation and the knowledge that it calls forth.”<sup>41</sup>

#### 4.1.6 *We Cannot Master Theology*

Although the scientist can never step ‘outside’ to check whether his theories about nature match reality in a final sense, the success of modern industry and technology suggests a significant and increasing level of mastery over nature. In contrast, the Christian can never master or wield the knowledge of God to her own advantage: there is no such thing as ‘theological technology’ or ‘spiritual mechanics.’<sup>42</sup> “The Christian is always in the position of ‘having and not having’ the truth, since reason cannot penetrate the paradox of God becoming human in Jesus Christ.”<sup>43</sup>

The truth, as it is contained in the Christian revelation, includes the recognition that it is neither possible for man to know the truth fully nor to avoid the error of pretending that he does. It is recognized that ‘grace’ always remains in partial contradiction to ‘nature,’ and is not merely its fulfillment.<sup>44</sup>

“We can truly know but only partially. We can begin to understand, but we cannot comprehend.”<sup>45</sup> As the Apostle Paul puts it, “we see in a mirror, darkly.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ross H. McKenzie and Benjamin Myers, “Dialectical Critical Realism in Science and Theology: Quantum Physics and Karl Barth,” *Science and Christian Belief* 20, no. 1 (April 2008): 65.

<sup>42</sup> See Donald G. Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission*, Christian Foundations 6 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 177.

<sup>43</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *God, the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love*, Christian Foundations 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 215. The inner quotation is from Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 2:217.

<sup>44</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, 2:217.

<sup>45</sup> Bloesch, *God, the Almighty*, 49.

<sup>46</sup> 1 Cor. 13:12 (ASV).

#### 4.1.7 *Objections Roundup 5*

The Christian takes seriously the biblical warnings about being right in her own eyes and deceiving herself,<sup>47</sup> and she considers the noetic effects of sin to be real.<sup>48</sup> Not only are humans on the receiving end of the Creator-creature relationship, but in our sin, we are opposed to God—we are opposed to an authority above ourselves. We can address the skeptic further by appreciating the additional constraints of theology compared to science.

First, Christianity is *more* self-critical in light of its object than science, not the other way around: the level of self-scrutiny required for Christian faith extends beyond the mere possibility of being wrong to the constant need for repentance and reliance on God. Second, theology teaches that all humans have a strong confirmation bias against God. It is unfair for the skeptic to accuse the Christian of “buying back” into her system if he dismisses the Christian warning that *all* humans are tempted to “buy back” into their system of sin and rebellion against God. Third, we come to Loftus’s accusation that it is intellectually dishonest for the Christian to refrain from judging her own beliefs with the same skepticism she directs at other religions.<sup>49</sup> Not only does this posit the sort of neutral area that I have been critiquing in this thesis, but it fails to take seriously the ‘skepticism’ that Scripture has about the human heart, etc.<sup>50</sup> Finally, we must consider whether the skeptic has been encountered by the object of theology at all. To evaluate Christianity on its own best terms, he must “taste and see.”<sup>51</sup> He may be unwilling, finding such

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<sup>47</sup> E.g., 1 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 6:3; James 1:26; 1 John 1:8.

<sup>48</sup> The *noetic effects of sin* are the effects on the mind due to sin and sin nature. Leaving aside the finer details of Calvinism vs. Arminianism on this point, the Christian rejects a fully Pelagian view of human reason. To some significant extent, humankind opposes God in our flesh and is prone to “suppress the truth.” Rom. 1:18.

<sup>49</sup> Loftus, *The Outsider Test for Faith*, 23.

<sup>50</sup> Notably, Loftus is aware of such criticisms and engages them. E.g., *The Outsider Test for Faith*, chaps. 6–8. Space prevents a full exchange, but it is fair to say that Loftus insists on human reason as the highest bar of authority.

<sup>51</sup> Ps. 34:8.

an answer to be grievously circular. Still, to make the dishonesty objection while refusing to ask at least for “ears to hear” is not unlike a solipsist who refuses to open his eyes.<sup>52</sup>

## 4.2 Theology Is More Objective Than Science

Although the uniqueness of theology’s object poses additional challenges, it also provides theology with strengths unknown to science. Yes, all human knowledge that makes contact with reality can be doubted *from the human side*.<sup>53</sup> However, true theology provides a form of knowledge that is more objective than science.<sup>54</sup> That is, theology is even more intimately encountered and determined by its respective, proper object.

### 4.2.1 *Transcendent and Immanent*

Imagine a hallway with a corner at the far end. Around the corner lies nature *itself* as an object of knowledge. Now, a scientist can never go around the corner or even look around it; however, every time he conducts an experiment, he gets a glimpse. It is not enough of a glimpse for him to perceive certain knowledge of nature, but it is actual contact with reality that informs his empirical approach. For theology, however, the object of knowledge is not inert, waiting around the corner to be probed from afar. God has come ‘around the corner’ to us in Jesus Christ.

The previous chapters have emphasized God’s otherness and transcendence, but this must be held in tension with his immanence: “the God of the Bible is both the Wholly Other and the Infinitely Near.”<sup>55</sup> There is no need for the Christian to become a super-god to have theological

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<sup>52</sup> Deut. 29:4; Matt. 11:15; Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8, 14:35; Rom. 11:18.

<sup>53</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 75.

<sup>54</sup> Importantly, this is not the objectivism we rejected in § 3.1.2. Here we are concerned with objectivity in its truest sense: authentic intimacy between subject and object. By contrast, objectivism pretends to have knowledge without personal knowledge; by rejecting the subject, objectivism forfeits any true relationship between subject and object.

<sup>55</sup> Bloesch, *God, the Almighty*, 24.

knowledge: “The foundation for Christian faith is not a timeless principle but a *personal address*. It is not a self-evident truth but the personification of truth in Jesus Christ.”<sup>56</sup>

#### 4.2.2 *More Objective, Not Less*

Unlike the object of natural science, God can reveal himself intimately. A tree cannot speak out to correct a botanist, but a friend can hide and disclose information: “a human being is personally other than we are, and is more profoundly objective” than a tree.<sup>57</sup> God can go further still: he “can come to us and enable us to think what was previously unthinkable.”<sup>58</sup> This makes theology more—*not less*—directly in contact with its proper object of inquiry than science is with nature, enjoying “a measure of objectivity that we encounter nowhere else”:<sup>59</sup>

Here human thinking undergoes an epistemic reorientation, a *metanoia*, under the creative and self-revealing impact of God’s personal interaction with us. Thus there takes place an *epistemological inversion* of our knowing relation but in strict accordance with the nature of God as he makes himself known to us. With creaturely realities we seek to know them in accordance with their nature as they become ‘disclosed’ to us under our questioning, but with God our knowing of him in accordance with his nature takes place under the constraint of his activity in ‘revealing’ himself to us. Here scientific method, pursued strictly in accordance with the nature and reality of God as he makes himself known to us is up against a measure of objectivity that we encounter nowhere else, under the compelling claims of his transcendent nature which we can never master. This means that we may know God truly only through his self-revelation and grace, and hence only in the mode of worship, prayer, and adoration, in which we respond humbly and obediently to his divine initiative in making himself known to us personally and savingly through his Word as our Creator, Lord and Savior.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Bloesch, *God, the Almighty*, 12; emphasis added.

<sup>57</sup> Torrance, *Theological and Natural Science*, 117. In terms of the language I have been using in this thesis, “more profoundly objective” might be taken to indicate that a person is an *ultimate* object of knowledge whereas a tree is merely a *proximate* object, subordinated to nature. Not only this, but the person-person epistemological relationship is of a more objective quality than the person-nature one: i.e., a friend can make himself an object of our understanding by telling us about himself. In this sense, our knowledge of him, this ‘object,’ is more intimate and directly determined—more objective—than any knowledge we might gain about a tree.

<sup>58</sup> Bloesch, *God, the Almighty*, 61.

<sup>59</sup> Torrance, *Theological and Natural Science*, 122.

<sup>60</sup> Torrance, *Theological and Natural Science*, 122.

In its dependence on the free action of God,<sup>61</sup> Barth argues that true theology can have no articulable epistemology.<sup>62</sup> As God freely gives himself to be known,

He acts towards us as the same triune God that He is in Himself, and in such a way that, ... we receive a share in the truth of *His knowledge of Himself*. Certainly it is the share which He thinks proper and which is therefore suitable for us. But in this share we have the reality of the true knowledge of Himself.<sup>63</sup>

Theologian Eberhard Jüngel helpfully interprets Barth: the possibility of theology is grounded in God freely giving his self-interpretation of his own self-knowledge.<sup>64</sup> “God accommodates himself to language in the very same degree, on the very same basis of being, that God accommodates himself to humanity in the [person of Jesus Christ].”<sup>65</sup> This does not mean that theology, as a human response to revelation, is a perfect or exhaustive description of God:

Theology is *modest* because its entire logic can only be a human *ana-logy* to that Word; analogical thought and speech do not claim to be, to say, to contain, or to control the original word. But it gives a reply to it by its attempt to co-respond with it; it seeks expressions that resemble the ratio and relations of the Word of God in a proportionate and, as far as feasible, approximate and appropriate way.<sup>66</sup>

However, “it is possible for [humanity] to hear and even speak, and hence also to know, the Word of God.”<sup>67</sup> Otherwise, “any serious hearing and speaking of God’s Word would be ruled out.”<sup>68</sup> Therefore, biblical faith rests in God’s personal address to humanity, by which “we

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<sup>61</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:15.

<sup>62</sup> Barth calls theology a “free science.” It “joyfully respects the mystery of the freedom of its object”—“freed by its object from any dependence on subordinate presuppositions.” This includes *epistemological* presuppositions. *Evangelical Theology*, 8.

<sup>63</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1:51. Notably, the misgivings associated with any pseudo-theology that would conceive knowledge of God as independent and observation-oriented do not apply here.

<sup>64</sup> See John Webster, ed., *The Possibilities of Theology: Studies in the Theology of Eberhard Jüngel in His Sixtieth Year* (London: T&T Clark, 2004).

<sup>65</sup> Eberhard Jüngel as summarized by Archie J. Spencer, “THS 742: Lecture XV,” *Christian Theology*, March 14, 2011, video, 1:06:31, <http://www.christiantheology.ca/videos/th-742-lecture-xii-2/>.

<sup>66</sup> Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 17.

<sup>67</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:187.

<sup>68</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:188-9.

really know the hidden God,” whose will is “at one with his will disclosed in Jesus Christ”—the center and goal of Scripture”<sup>69</sup> Thus, for Barth, divine revelation is direct *and not provisional*.<sup>70</sup>

From a Christian perspective, science may even be understood as more provisional than theology because there is no omniscient, self-interpreting agent choosing to reveal essential and adequate knowledge of nature. Recalling figure 3-3, whereas science must rely on axioms and (reasonable) assumptions, theology rests on God’s promise that his Word is true. Therefore, theology’s first-tier lens must be understood as faith in God’s promise and not merely a philosophical assumption: God “exists and ... he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”<sup>71</sup>

#### 4.2.3 *Subjectivity as an Asset*

Critics of an objectivist bent have long disparaged theology as “unscientific” for its subjectivity, which is evident, e.g., in reliance on “ancient authorities and traditions.”<sup>72</sup> Polanyi shows, however, that subjectivity is not at all the liability that objectivist, falsification-centric thinking makes it out to be. “All our personal and rational activity ... [has] a subjective pole and an objective pole. The subjective pole is the knowing, believing, acting person, and the objective pole is ... some reality independent of himself.”<sup>73</sup> The scientist’s subjective involvement is an

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<sup>69</sup> Bloesch, *God, the Almighty*, 63–4.

<sup>70</sup> While *revelation* is direct for Barth, *knowledge* of God is indirect: “At bottom, knowledge of God in faith is always this indirect knowledge of God, knowledge of God in His works, and in these particular works—in the determining and using of certain creaturely realities to bear witness to the divine objectivity. What distinguishes faith from unbelief ... is that it is content with this indirect knowledge of God. It does not think that the knowledge of God in His works is insufficient. ... [I]t is grateful really to know the real God in His works.” *Church Dogmatics*, II/1:17.

<sup>71</sup> Heb. 11:6 (NIV). Perhaps by grace this lens may *begin* (chronologically, not theologically) as something more philosophical; but in the real, theological sense, it cannot remain that way. Cf. § 4.2.4.2.

<sup>72</sup> “In our day, theology has been challenged as a legitimate academic pursuit on at least two main fronts. One is the question of means, of procedure: Theology is, to put it bluntly, accused of being *unscientific*. It is hopelessly fraught with prejudice, it defers to ancient authorities and traditions, and it remains impervious to counter-evidence and contrary arguments. It constantly drives investigation to foregone conclusions, perverting science into propaganda. It is the very model of unscientific, anti-intellectual discourse.” John G. Stackhouse Jr., “Putting God in God’s Place: Does Theology Belong in the University?,” *Studies in Religion* 45, no. 3 (2016): 379.

<sup>73</sup> Torrance, *Belief in Science*, 11.

*asset* that makes science possible: he must bring proper passions to the data, make nonlinear leaps beyond the data in the moment of discovery, etc.

Science's enduring paradigms, hard-core theories, and research programs could even be called *traditions*. The objectivist may be scandalized: *a scientist ought not to impose his own, subjective understanding on the data!* But we have seen that science requires a measure of legitimate subjectivity. It is of course a problem if certain preconceptions prevent proper attention to science's object of knowledge.<sup>74</sup> However, there are also needful, *legitimate* 'preconceptions' or 'traditions' for scientists. E.g., an early-career physicist does well to use current, successful theories to interpret data by assuming that they are at least mostly correct—by trusting that they result from earlier scientists properly attending to nature.

In theology, we bring more than a tentatively successful theory to the 'data' of Scripture: we have the Rule of Faith.<sup>75</sup> Again, the notion that one *ought* to bring a tradition or subjective viewpoint to the data flies in the face of modern rationalism—a *failure to be objective!* However, the core tradition and teachings of Christianity are the result of properly attending to the object of theology. What we have in the Rule of Faith, therefore, is not an alien preconception imposed on the Scriptural data, derailing attendance to theology's proper object. Rather, we have a *legitimate* tradition to bring to the Bible.<sup>76</sup> It is *even more* legitimate than for a physicist to tentatively assume that Einstein's theories are correct.

This is not to denigrate scholarship that strives to read Scripture 'objectively' by applying, e.g., a grammatical-historical hermeneutic. But it is to say that the Christian's position

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<sup>74</sup> Recall, e.g., Torrance's discussion of Greek preconceptions in § 2.3.3.1.

<sup>75</sup> See § 3.3.1.

<sup>76</sup> So much so that church fathers such as Irenaeus and Tertullian can effectively criticize heretics for using the *wrong tradition* to interpret the Scriptures. See, e.g., Allert, *A High View of Scripture?*, 78–97; Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism*, 87–99.

is more enriched than simply being alone in a vacuum with the biblical data. God has taken care of *both* the objective and subjective poles involved in biblical interpretation for the church: objectively, there is the data of Scripture itself; subjectively,<sup>77</sup> there is the Rule of Faith as well as the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. This is another advantage unique to theology.

#### 4.2.4 *Objections Roundup 6*

##### 4.2.4.1 Preaching and Finality

We now come to the skeptic's charge that the Christian preaches with finality that which could only be provisional. First, the truth about God is not provisional from God's point of view; his self-knowledge is final. If God has shared a portion of his own self-knowledge with the Christian, then she enjoys a level of objectivity that outstrips science. Second, the Christian does not understand herself to be preaching on her own investigational authority, as though she were delivering the results of her own observations and experiments on the divine. If this were her understanding, perhaps there would be something intellectually dishonest about her gospel presentation. However, the Christian preaches with a form of revelatory authority delegated by Jesus Christ.<sup>78</sup> For the skeptic to insist that she cannot possibly speak with this authority is, once again, to deny a core part of the Christian faith in advance.

##### 4.2.4.2 Proportionate Confidence

The skeptic accuses the Christian of holding her faith disproportionately to the evidence. First, as we have seen throughout this thesis, the skeptic's approach to evidence tends to rule out Christianity in the first place. He imagines a neutral arena for humans to weigh evidence as

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<sup>77</sup> Or at least 'subjectively' as the objectivist would understand it.

<sup>78</sup> E.g., Matt. 28:16-20.

objective, innocent explorers. However, the claims of Christianity cannot be charitably evaluated this way. At best, we would arrive at some provisional pseudo-theology. Second, the skeptic insists on a type of evidence that is inappropriate for the modality of reason—and at least Dawkins, Boghossian, Coyne, and Zara indicate that *no* evidence could suffice.

Third, suppose the skeptic appreciates the above and that he only speaks of the sort of evidence that Christian apologists themselves would offer. In this case, he mistakes the difference between *knowing* that Christianity is true and *showing* that it is not necessarily false. While perhaps evidence is *chronologically* prior to the Christian's faith, it cannot be *theologically* prior. The Christian might be a former adherent of another religion who left upon finding evidence that it was false or that the evidence for Christianity was superior. Even in this case, she is not a Christian *because of* the evidence but because she exists downstream from an ongoing, transformative encounter with the Holy Spirit. She has not leapt beyond the probabilities in the context of some empirical observation—that *would* be intellectually dishonest. Instead, she is a new creature. The skeptic thus sets up a target at which the Christian does not aim, chastising her for missing: a test Christianity could never pass, even if it is true.

#### 4.2.4.3 A Dependent View of Things

It is true that Christians sometimes speak with arrogance and pride, looking down on non-Christians with an assumed “superior view of things,” as the skeptic complains.<sup>79</sup> However, this is not an attitude taught by Scripture. The Christian ought to speak as one humbled by God's gift—someone who has received, not achieved, a perspective informed and transformed by revelation. “What do you have that you did not receive?” Paul asks the Corinthians. “And if you

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<sup>79</sup> See § 1.2.2.4.

did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?”<sup>80</sup> “The confidence proper to a Christian is not the confidence of one who claims possession of demonstrable and indubitable knowledge. It is the confidence of one who [has] heard and answered the call that comes from the God through whom and for whom all things were made: ‘Follow me.’”<sup>81</sup>

### 4.3 Summary and Next Steps

In this chapter, we have shifted from a largely hypothetical and philosophical posture toward giving explicitly theological responses to the dishonesty objection. Considering the uniqueness of theology’s object of knowledge, we can see that theology is more constrained and objective than science. Theology may face several obstacles unknown to science, but its posture of dependence on God’s freely given self-knowledge makes theology possible. In this case, the possibility of theology is also the Christian’s possibility of intellectual honesty amid confident preaching. The following chapter will address remaining objections as we conclude.

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<sup>80</sup> 1 Cor. 4:7. See also Rom. 12:3, Gal. 6:3.

<sup>81</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 105.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

This thesis has presented the skeptic's dishonesty objection from science in its most potent form. We have rejected falsification as insufficient for understanding all of science, much less theology. Each object of knowledge—nature and revelation—should be sought on its own terms, without *a priori* demands getting in the way. While seeking common ground between the Christian and the skeptic regarding intellectual honesty and humanity's finitude under a transcendent God, we have maintained disagreement on God's authority and transforming address toward the Christian. We have responded to nearly all the skeptic's accusations by comparing science and theology regarding their similarities and differences. This concluding chapter addresses the remaining objections, making a final response to the dishonesty objection.

### 5.1 The Last Roundup

#### 5.1.1 *Dishonesty About Science*

Despite this defence, the skeptic may yet feel that some form of the dishonesty objection is warranted by Christian dishonesty about science:<sup>1</sup> e.g., the often-repeated claim that had the universe been old, the lunar lander would have fallen into a deep layer of dust on the moon. In truth, even before the moon landing, NASA's engineers, having an ancient understanding of the universe, "were convinced that the [moon's] surface would be firm. The foot pads for Surveyor

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<sup>1</sup> Dawkins's complaint (quoted in § 1.1.2) about religious people who "know they are right ... in advance" is made in a passage on fundamentalist subversion of science. *The God Delusion*, 319–23.

and for Apollo were designed for landing on a relatively firm surface.”<sup>2</sup> Despite being refuted in print, claims of “missing dust” were repeatedly published in the 1970s and 80s.<sup>3</sup>

If the skeptic takes Christianity at its best, he must recognize that many Christians in the sciences advocate for intellectual honesty.<sup>4</sup> Some Christian authors hold “missing dust” advocates accountable: “there is little excuse for writers with advanced degrees in scientific fields who do not keep themselves informed of technical publications on topics about which they choose to write.”<sup>5</sup> Christian groups such as BioLogos offer correctives to misinformation about science,<sup>6</sup> and church historians point out that the current, problematic relationship between science and evangelicalism is not intrinsic to the Christian faith.<sup>7</sup>

Writing about A.D. 415, Augustine of Hippo exhorts Christians to avoid repeating falsehoods about nature. Given that many non-Christians are acquainted with the study of nature, he argues that it is “disgraceful and dangerous” for them

to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense. ... If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well

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<sup>2</sup> Howard J. Van Till, Davis A. Young, and Clarence Menninga, *Science Held Hostage: What's Wrong With Creation Science and Evolutionism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 73.

<sup>3</sup> It was also presented to me in a tenth-grade science class at a Christian school in Edmonton, AB (1998-99). Prominent young-earth organizations now recognize the moon dust argument as flawed: “Until new evidence is forthcoming, creationists should not continue to use the dust on the moon as evidence against an old age for the moon and the solar system.” Andrew A. Snelling and David Rush, “Moon Dust and the Age of the Solar System,” *Journal of Creation* 7, no. 1 (April 1993): 2–42. However, one can still find it presented more recently, e.g., Ron Calais, “Proof That the Moon Is Young!,” *Creation Moments* (blog), n.d., accessed January 12, 2022, <https://creationmoments.com/article/proof-that-the-moon-is-young/>. For a detailed account of this problematic claim, see Van Till, Young, and Menninga, *Science Held Hostage*, chap. 4.

<sup>4</sup> The American Scientific Affiliation (which includes its expression in Canada) is a group of scientists and those interested in the sciences who are committed to honestly holding together science and Christian faith. “About the ASA,” American Scientific Affiliation, accessed January 19, 2022, <https://network.asa3.org/page/ASAAbout>; “About CSCA,” Canadian Scientific and Christian Affiliation, accessed January 19, 2022, <https://www.csc.ca/about/>.

<sup>5</sup> Van Till, Young, and Menninga, *Science Held Hostage*, 81.

<sup>6</sup> Deborah Haarsma, Jim Stump, and David Buller, “Beyond ‘Plandemic’: A Christian Response to Conspiracies,” BioLogos, last modified May 11, 2020, <https://biologos.org/articles/beyond-plandemic-a-christian-response-to-conspiracies/>.

<sup>7</sup> Warfield, Noll, and Livingstone, *Evolution, Scripture, and Science*; Livingstone, David N., *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders: The Encounter Between Evangelical Theology and Evolutionary Thought* (Vancouver: Regent College, 1984); Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), chap. 7.

and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven, when they think their pages are full of falsehoods on facts which they themselves have learnt from experience and the light of reason? Reckless and incompetent expounders of Holy Scripture bring untold trouble and sorrow on their wiser brethren when they are caught in one of their mischievous false opinions and are taken to task by those who are not bound by the authority of our sacred books.<sup>8</sup>

There are indeed Christians who embrace self-defence over self-criticism regarding modern science, indulging conspiracy theories and bad science in cosmology, geology, biology, climatology, immunology, etc.—even using Scripture to support their views. However, as Augustine makes clear above, these are not Christian thinkers *at their best*. Mature Christian scholarship is self-critical, avoiding “a simple celebration of everyone and everything that is on one’s side”<sup>9</sup>—including pseudoscience that seems to support one’s reading of Scripture.

As a reminder, we cannot readily judge the difference between error and intellectual dishonesty from the outside. It is complicated to properly relate investigational authority with revelational authority (a challenge the skeptic does not face). Consequently, there is a publicly broken relationship between many of God’s scientists and preachers, with well-intentioned, if mistaken, people on both sides.<sup>10</sup> But even for straightforward cases, a best-vs-best approach will not singly fixate on examples of Christian dishonesty about science.

### 5.1.2 *Dishonesty About Other Religions*

The skeptic may be unsatisfied with this defence, arguing (a) that it remains intellectually dishonest for the Christian to dismiss other religions and (b) that it could be made on behalf of

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<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 1.19.

<sup>9</sup> George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University, 1998), 54.

<sup>10</sup> I am highlighting honest mistakes about science made by non-scientist preachers, but non-theologian scientists can make them about theology too. Being in neither group, I’ve made some mistakes myself.

just about any religion. To be intellectually honest, she would have to try out every single religion from the inside before choosing Christianity as though it were the best one.

#### 5.1.2.1 A Failure to Investigate?

At first, this may seem to be a most formidable criticism. However, by taking a *kata physin* approach and reminding ourselves of the dependent character of all knowledge, we can ably respond. The problem of position applies here also: just as a Christian cannot stand outside herself to become another God looking down on theology next to God, neither can she look down on all human religions and compare them to God in some independent way. Not even a scientist can look down on all possible paradigms in his field to compare them from the outside.

Again, the Christian does not speak as someone who has ‘done the math,’ calculating independently that Christianity is the best religion. This would assume human reason as the highest bar of authority. If the Christian were to adopt such an approach consistently, she would end up in Coyne’s position: refusing to receive by faith even if given stupendous evidence.

Crucially, as the Christian moves away from revelation—as she relies on her own attempt to determine *the* true religion—she becomes like Peter, sinking through the waves when he looks away from Christ.<sup>11</sup> She must resist the temptation: humans have neither the perspective nor the authority to determine which religion is true. Any such attempt shifts the Christian’s dependence from God onto herself. She ends up farther away from the knowledge of God, not closer.

Importantly, this is not to dismiss negative apologetics.<sup>12</sup> There is no reason the Christian can’t point out, e.g., that the Book of Mormon reports horses and metallurgy in the Americas

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<sup>11</sup> Matt. 14:22-33.

<sup>12</sup> There is even a place for *positive* apologetics, but in a ‘negative mode.’ E.g., “You should become a Christian because of the historical evidence for the Resurrection” is positive apologetics in a ‘positive mode’—*showing* that Christianity is true (Craig). However, “Look at this evidence; don’t listen to skeptics who say there is no historical

before the Europeans brought them here or that genomic evidence strongly contradicts the Mormon claim that native Americans are descended from Semitic peoples.<sup>13</sup> To be intellectually honest, however, she should be aware of weaknesses and inconsistencies in her own thinking. She should not point out problems with Mormon archeology if she does not grapple with challenges to Christian thinking from the same field.<sup>14</sup>

The Christian should not assume that she has the final balance of evidence in her own time and culture. What appears to be a sound and convincing argument today may be less convincing tomorrow. E.g., writing in the early fifth century, Augustine

frankly admits that the books containing the story of Christ belong to an ancient history that anyone may refuse to believe. Therefore, he turns to the present miracle of the church as the basis for accepting the authority of Scripture. He saw the very existence of the mighty and universal church as an overwhelming sign that the Scriptures are true and divine. ...

... Even if the unbeliever rejects all biblical miracles, he is still left with one stupendous miracle, which is all one needs, namely, the fact of the whole world believing in Christianity without the benefit of the Gospel miracles.<sup>15</sup>

This argument may have been convincing in Augustine's time and place, but the skeptic would not find this convincing in the least today.

The Christian is on her most solid footing when the goal of her apologetics is to expose the shifting cultural pretensions against the knowledge of God in her own time and place so that (a) that they will not hinder evangelism and (b) any Christians troubled by them can proceed

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evidence for the Resurrection" uses the same positive apologetic in a 'negative mode'—*showing* that Christianity is not necessarily false (my approach).

<sup>13</sup> Ross J. Anderson, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Quick Christian Guide to the Mormon Holy Book* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), chap. 7.

<sup>14</sup> E.g., Peter Enns says that "Biblical archaeologists are about as certain as you can be about these things that the conquest of Canaan as the Bible describes did not happen: no mass invasion from the outside by an Israelite army, and no extermination of Canaanites as God commanded." *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 58. Whether or not the Christian agrees with Enns, she should be aware of such challenges. She should not make a nuanced, qualified response while holding her conversation partner to the most wooden, literalistic understanding of his own religious texts; she should not compare the most robust Christian defences with the weakest defences of other religions.

<sup>15</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 31; Augustine, *City of God* 22.5.

with knowing God. Her goal must not be to replace a transforming Christian encounter with a pseudo-theological ‘certainty’ of her own making. “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”<sup>16</sup>

#### 5.1.2.2 A Monopolized Defence?

This is an area for further research, but other religions probably could make a defence like the one in this thesis—at least similar from the skeptic’s perspective. The Christian need not be troubled, however, for several reasons. First, the Christian faith does not depend upon proving that adherents of other religions—or even skeptics themselves—are intellectually dishonest. This is a problem not for the Christian, but for the skeptic: *he* is the one who must ask himself whether it is reasonable to suppose that all religious people are intellectually dishonest.<sup>17</sup>

Second, this objection is similar to one made against Plantinga’s *Warranted Christian Belief*—that other religions could also claim warranted belief using his approach.

Interestingly, Plantinga does concede that practitioners of other theistic religions could, like the Christian, argue with equal cogency that, say, a Muslim version of Plantinga’s model is epistemically possible, philosophically unobjectionable given the truth of Islam, and probably warranted in a way similar to that described in the model if Islam is true. But such a conclusion does not support relativism. It merely shows that there is no *de jure* objection to other theistic faiths independent of *de facto* objections to them.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, the *de jure* dishonesty objection depends on *de facto* denials of many things necessary for the Christian faith to be intellectually honest in the first place; if the skeptic has maneuvered himself into a similar position toward other religions, that is his own problem.

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<sup>16</sup> 1 Cor. 3:11.

<sup>17</sup> There is an important difference between (a) the Christian’s belief—which she accepts on *revelational* authority—that she, along with all humanity are subject to a spiritual delusion and (b) the skeptic’s belief—on his own *investigational* authority—that all religious people are intellectually dishonest; this is especially curious given that the skeptic so strongly emphasizes the tentative, provisional nature of his own authority. Nonetheless, such is the corner he has painted himself into.

<sup>18</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 167.

### 5.1.3 Dishonesty About Falsification

The skeptic accuses the Christian of making non-falsifiable claims while feigning falsifiability, particularly in the often-repeated claim that Christianity is a falsifiable religion because finding the bones of Christ would falsify Christianity. This objection presents another area for further research, but we can offer a brief response by comparing this with another disagreement about falsification in science. On the one hand, everything said about falsification in chapter 3 stands: *how many anomalies are too many?* is an unavoidably personal question,<sup>19</sup> and auxiliary hypotheses are discarded before core theories.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, it seems too much to say that ‘knock-down’ falsification is impossible in principle. It is at least conceivable that certain knock-down anomalies could directly falsify a core theory.

#### 5.1.3.1 Thought Experiment: Could One Tooth Falsify Evolution?

Dawkins says he would gladly change his mind about evolution “if the necessary evidence were forthcoming.”<sup>21</sup> But identifying and agreeing upon the necessary evidence involves personal knowledge, as the following disagreement between two Christian thinkers makes clear. Science-religion scholar Denis Lamoureux emphasizes the provisional, evidence-dependent nature of evolutionary theory by describing a potential knock-down anomaly:

I find that the evidence for evolution is *overwhelming*. Every science that deals with origins fits tightly together and comes to only one conclusion: the universe and life evolved. I have experienced the fruitfulness and predictability of the theory of evolution. Every time a new fossil is discovered, it always fits exactly where it should. I have yet to see evidence that falsifies biological evolution. In fact, evolution is the easiest theory to disprove. *Find just one human tooth near the bottom of the geological record and you could destroy evolutionary science. That’s no exaggeration, but I wouldn’t hold my*

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<sup>19</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 138. See § 3.1.2 above.

<sup>20</sup> Barbour, *Religion and Science*, 132. See § 3.1.4 above.

<sup>21</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 320.

*breath waiting for it to happen.* I recognize the explanatory power of evolutionary theory. As many have said, biology makes sense in the light of evolution.<sup>22</sup>

For Rauser, Lamoureux's statement is "hyperbolic at best and outright false at worst":

Evolution is a good theory[,] and good theories are not falsifiable in the way [Lamoureux] describes because they explain *multiple* lines of evidence. Consequently, when recalcitrant facts ... against a theory arise, they tend to be treated as anomalous exceptions outweighed by the overall explanatory power of [the] theory. *Or* they are the catalyst for the theory being amended to some degree to accommodate the fact.<sup>23</sup>

Rauser expresses a Kuhnian-Lakatosian view, while Lamoureux stresses something closer to Popper. However, both refer to the multiple, mutually confirming lines of evidence for evolution. These thinkers deeply agree—*evolutionary theory depends on evidence*—while differing on presentation. Perhaps their disagreement is subtle: Lamoureux might mean, "[if we were *certain* we had found] just one human tooth ..."; Rauser might read it as, "[if we noticed what *appeared* to be] just one human tooth ... ." Interestingly, Lamoureux's confidence in evolution lies in how *easy* it would be to falsify it, whereas Rauser's confidence is in how *hard* it would be.<sup>24</sup> In any case, biologists would have to consider such a find very seriously.<sup>25</sup>

This thought experiment shows that emphasizing ease of falsification is an unpredictable method for persuading others to adopt a position. What some thinkers take to be a knock-down anomaly may not be readily accepted by others.

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<sup>22</sup> Denis O. Lamoureux et al., *Four Views on the Historical Adam*, ed. Matthew Barrett and Ardel B. Caneday, Counterpoints: Bible and theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 40; closing emphasis added.

<sup>23</sup> Randal Rauser, "Is Evolution the Easiest Theory to Disprove? A Response to Denis Lamoureux," *Randal Rauser* (blog), May 16, 2014, <https://randalrauser.com/2014/05/is-evolution-the-easiest-theory-to-disprove-a-response-to-denis-lamoureux/>.

<sup>24</sup> Rauser, "Is Evolution the Easiest Theory to Disprove? A Response to Denis Lamoureux."

<sup>25</sup> As Coyne puts it, evolution is vulnerable to several possible "observations that, if repeated and confirmed, would disprove parts of [it]," such as finding "fossils in the wrong place," "adaptations in one species good *only* for a second species," and "a general lack of genetic variation in species." Thus, Coyne says evolution is falsifiable "in the Popperian sense" (although his description seems more Lakatosian). "What Would Disprove Evolution?," *Why Evolution Is True* (blog), July 9, 2012, <https://whyevolutionistrue.com/2012/07/09/what-would-disprove-evolution/>.

## 5.1.3.2 Thought Experiment: Could the Bones of Christ Falsify Christianity?

For Christian apologists like Craig, discovering the bones of Christ (BOC) would be a knock-down anomaly for the Christian faith. The implication is that this is a *live* criterion for falsification of the Resurrection and Christianity along with it. Therefore, apologists argue that “*Christianity is a falsifiable religion*. Christianity makes objective claims ... that, by the evidence, can be either confirmed or disconfirmed.”<sup>26</sup> The skeptic argues that by appealing to the hypothetical BOC, the Christian merely feigns falsifiability.

For fairness’s sake, let’s develop this objection *from the skeptic’s point of view*.<sup>27</sup> To see the problem more clearly, let’s set up a syllogism:

- (a) If the BOC are discovered and verified, then Christianity is falsified.
- (b) It is theoretically possible to discover and verify the BOC.
- (c) Therefore, it is theoretically possible to falsify Christianity.

For the truthfulness of (a), apologists like Craig appeal to Scripture: “if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.”<sup>28</sup> The Christian and the skeptic can readily agree that the truthfulness of *historic, traditional* Christianity depends on the Resurrection.<sup>29</sup> However, similar to the Lamoureux-Rauser disagreement above, not everyone agrees about knock-down anomalies: there are people who describe themselves as Christians and yet reject (a).<sup>30</sup> Whether the Christian is willing to recognize their faith as orthodox is beside the point: from the skeptic’s point of view, there is already a problem with the syllogism.

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<sup>26</sup> Craig and McDowell, “Can I Get a Witness?,” emphasis in original.

<sup>27</sup> I.e., I am again playing the role of the accuser for the rest of § 5.1.3.2.

<sup>28</sup> 1 Cor. 15:14 (NRSV). E.g., Craig and McDowell, “Can I Get a Witness?”

<sup>29</sup> I include myself in this group, insisting on a literal, bodily Resurrection.

<sup>30</sup> Some scholars, such as John Dominic Crossan, argue that Christianity could remain true, in some sense, without Jesus’ bodily resurrection. See William Lane Craig et al., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? A Debate Between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998); see also Randal Rauser, *You’re Not as Crazy as I Think: Dialogue in a World of Loud Voices and Hardened Opinions* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012), chap. 7.

A more serious problem lies with (b). Even if the alleged BOC were discovered, asks Boghossian, “what evidence would it take to satisfy [Christians] that they were actually the bones of Christ?”<sup>31</sup> Craig himself doubts that such a discovery could be verified.<sup>32</sup> Biologists could probably verify an out-of-place human tooth, but to verify the BOC would require either an epistemic miracle or a set of coincidences so unlikely that it might justify belief in God anyway.<sup>33</sup> In fact, (b) is extremely unlikely, if not false altogether. Therefore, we almost certainly cannot conclude (c). “If ... there would be no way for you to know ... that they were the bones of Christ, then your belief isn’t falsifiable.”<sup>34</sup>

Accordingly, Craig’s implied answer to the question, “If the bones of Christ *were* discovered, could we falsify Christianity?” is the same as above: doubtful. He doubts Christianity could be falsified if faced with the bones he says would warrant falsification. Moreover, his placing of the Holy Spirit over evidence suggests that this discovery *should* not warrant falsification for Christians even if the BOC could be authenticated.<sup>35</sup> This ‘falsifiable’ Christianity cannot be falsified: the relevant evidence neither could nor should falsify it.

Thus, the skeptic might reasonably ask, *is the Christian faith contingent on evidence—epistemologically provisional—or not?* If the answer is Yes, it is misleading to declare

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<sup>31</sup> Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 61.

<sup>32</sup> Craig, “Would Finding Jesus’ Corpse Falsify Christianity?”

<sup>33</sup> Randal Rauser suggests that if the bones were found “along with documentary evidence that the resurrection was a hoax staged by the apostles ..., [it] would most certainly disconfirm the resurrection.” *The Swedish Atheist, the Scuba Diver, and Other Apologetic Rabbit Trails* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 78. However, (i) this narrows further a condition for falsification (finding the bones alone) that is already too narrow to be a meaningfully live option; (ii) there is ample reason to imagine that Christians would simply dismiss such documentary evidence as a hoax itself; and (iii) it is hard to see how such documentary evidence could be authenticated in terms of authorship. Even if it were dated to the time of the apostles, it could have been written by someone antagonistic to Christianity and placed next to any young-adult male’s bones; moreover, it would not be impossible to mimic the vocabulary and style of a New Testament author—or simply claim to be an apostle who hadn’t written anything else.

<sup>34</sup> Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 61.

<sup>35</sup> “Should a conflict arise between the witness of the Holy Spirit ... and beliefs based on argument and evidence, then it is the former which must take precedence over the latter.” Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 48. The reader is reminded that I am taking a Devil’s advocate approach in this paragraph.

independence from future evidence by preaching the gospel with an air of finality, speaking beyond the evidence's probabilities. If the answer is No, then it is misleading to claim that the faith is vulnerable to an empirically live criterion for falsification. If the moment calls for an intellectually responsible, honest, and careful appearance, the apologist emphasizes her (impossible) falsification criterion; otherwise, she speaks with an air of final authority that exceeds what evidence can ever provide.

#### 5.1.3.3 Response

Importantly, not every apologist argues that the Holy Spirit takes precedence over contrary evidence. However, the skeptic makes an important criticism here. There is a subtle but significant difference between the mere *fact* that the truthfulness of Christianity depends on the Resurrection and the *claim* that the Resurrection is meaningfully vulnerable to empirical falsification today. Nonetheless, several responses to the skeptic are warranted.

Notably, Craig and others do not claim Christianity is falsifiable in the scientific sense but in a looser, historical sense. They do not offer the BOC as a criterion that could lead Christians to reject the scientific 'hypothesis' of Christianity. None of them thinks of Christianity as a hypothesis. It would be more charitable to understand them this way: they highlight that if Christianity were false, disconfirming evidence might reasonably be expected. However, we are now at a distance from the evidence presented to the apostles. It would be best to emphasize the impact that producing the recognizable body of Christ would have had *at that time*.

The skeptic rightly points out a tension between emphasis on evidence vs. the Holy Spirit. This tension is exemplified in competing schools of apologetics and the fact that Christian traditions and thinkers have debated faith and reason for two millennia. We must refrain from repeating our preceding discussions of modalities of reason, evidence, and provisionality here.

Still, many of those ideas apply: the Christian must do justice to both investigational authority (evidence) and revelational authority (Holy Spirit, etc.); it should not be surprising that the skeptic can find paradoxes and present them uncharitably.

Turning to the Scripture itself, Paul's reasoning runs in a direction opposite to the common apologetic appropriation of 1 Corinthians 15. He writes to Greeks with a cultural heritage of elevating immaterial things and disparaging material things—such as a resurrected *body*. It makes sense that Paul might need to overcome that prejudice: *since you are Christians, don't you know you must accept a bodily Resurrection?* In contrast, it would make no sense for him to spend his whole letter admonishing, encouraging, and instructing his ostensibly Christian audience only to pause and try to convince them to become Christians.

Paul is not trying to convince modern skeptics to accept Christianity based on evidence for a historical Resurrection: his task is not even to convince the Corinthians *that Christianity is true because of the Resurrection*—but to admonish them *to accept the bodily Resurrection by virtue of their Christianity*. He uses *reductio ad absurdum*: “if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.”<sup>36</sup> “Paul then uses deliberative rhetoric to underline the disadvantages or (here) disastrous consequences of such a denial: faith is empty; the apostles are false witnesses; there is no release from sin; dead believers are lost.”<sup>37</sup> I.e., *if you reject the bodily Resurrection, you're implying that your own faith is useless!* Paul expects his already-Christian audience to balk at the consequences of rejecting the bodily Resurrection. He is

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<sup>36</sup> 1 Cor. 15:13-14 (NRSV).

<sup>37</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1177.

not saying, *look how easy our faith would be to falsify*; he is saying, *look how serious the consequences of denying bodily resurrection are*.

If it is impossible to verify the BOC, Christianity is not falsifiable concerning such a find. Not only is it misleading for the Christian to imply otherwise, but by appealing to falsification as an epistemic virtue for faith, she implies that objectivist human reason is a standard by which revelation may be judged worthy of human assent. The fact that some liberal Christians are willing to depart with a literal Resurrection while professing some form of the faith further complicates the matter.<sup>38</sup> Finally, Scripture makes a point opposite to the common apologetic appropriation. The Christian should refrain from saying Christianity is falsifiable (today) concerning the BOC; she should thank skeptics like Boghossian for highlighting this error. However, nothing above shows that the Christian faith is inevitably intellectually dishonest—only that Christians can make overstatements. Intellectual honesty concerns what Christians do *after* this is made known to them.

#### 5.1.3.4 An Elaborately Constructed Delusion?

Finally, the skeptic may reply that the Christian's long-winded theology and philosophy talk only commits her more deeply to her delusion. Everything above is a needlessly elaborate retreat further into the Christian's confirmation bias, and not unlike the solipsist with flowers on his nightstand, she has crossed her own point of no return. She is so afraid of trusting her own human reason that she would say *anything* to get out of it. The skeptic can only listen helplessly as she defines beings and their bizarre requirements into existence. Is God unfalsifiable? *That's the skeptic's fault for expecting falsification at all*. Is the Christian self-defensive instead of self-

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<sup>38</sup> Again, I am not claiming to personally recognize this as orthodox Christian faith—only that this is a problem for a positive apologetic that invokes the BOC as a live falsification criterion.

critical? *No problem: she can invent her own personal standard for self-criticism.* Does the Christian believe things beyond evidence? *Concoct a way to make theology look good.* Is the Christian unable to defend her view? *Get out ahead of the problem by drawing attention to it ad nauseam and inventing a term for it, such as “the problem of position.”*

Such an objection *does* exemplify the problem of position, of course—including the very criticism of the idea. This is the consequence of suggesting to human reason that it is not the highest court of authority. The Christian is well aware of how things look without the eyes of faith: she appears more delusional than a self-described time traveller who claims to bring knowledge back from the future; more eccentric than someone who describes her alien abduction.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, she cannot expect to answer the dishonesty objection in a way that will satisfy the skeptic or anyone else who comes to “the mystery of life with the certainty that human reason can at length entirely resolve the mystery,”<sup>40</sup> assuming it can be solved. Given the choice between cultural respectability and intellectual honesty toward her transforming encounter, she chooses the latter and everything that comes with it.

## 5.2 A Pretension Against the Knowledge of God

We have heard the skeptic’s dishonesty objection in its strongest form, addressing it throughout this thesis. Having articulated a Christian understanding of science and theology, we can see that the dishonesty objection depends on anti-theological assumptions.

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<sup>39</sup> She would have legitimate, unassailable authority to speak about her experience in both cases. However, these examples do not carry the same offence as true theology. A time traveller has information—observational expertise—but she does not have authority above human reason itself.

<sup>40</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949), 172.

### 5.2.1 *Intellectual Hypocrisy*

The dishonesty objection tolerates from science what it considers dishonest from Christianity. Science may uncritically accept the encounter with its ultimate object of knowledge as veridical, but theology cannot. Science may depend on its object for knowledge without permission from any other knowledge project, but theology may not. Science may receive its object as *what it really is*, under the licence of humanity to probe it for knowledge, but theology may not receive its object as properly beyond the human right to control it. Scientists may warn their students away from pseudoscience, but theologians must not criticize pseudo-theologies. The object of science has corrective authority, but theology cannot look to its own object as authoritative. Scientists may personally commit to scientific paradigms with universal intent, but theological paradigms must be shown one-hundred percent certain before committing to them. The axioms of science are permissible, but the Rule of Faith is not. This is intellectual hypocrisy.

### 5.2.2 *Intellectual Prejudice*

The dishonesty objection excludes in advance the possibility of revealed, authoritative, and transformative theological knowledge as Christian thinkers understand it. There can be no evidence to bring the skeptic to faith because human reason cannot justify an authority higher than itself; at most, trickster aliens might exist. Epistemological inversions are not thinkable: if God exists, he must join humanity in a neutral arena of being where humanity can observe and arrive at his authority as the end-product of reason. Even if such a God were to incarnate himself, he must not come on his own authority;<sup>41</sup> his authority must be underwritten and co-signed by human authority. Under no circumstances may theology suggest that human reason is impaired

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Matt. 7:28-29.

or limited in scope, for “we ... are the explorers, ... [and] the real questions are the ones we formulate and put to the universe.”<sup>42</sup> The very idea of a way of knowing over which we are not masters is oxymoronic. This is intellectual prejudice.

### 5.2.3 *Intellectual Dishonesty*

The skeptic’s *de jure* objection is thus dependent on *de facto* denials. By virtue of intellectual hypocrisy and prejudice, the dishonesty objection erects a standard that Christianity, even if true, could never meet. This is indeed a “pretension ... against the knowledge of God,”<sup>43</sup> and the skeptic must now choose between addressing his error or embracing intellectual dishonesty in making the dishonesty objection. Regardless, the charge that the Christian faith is less intellectually honest than science does not follow from a comparison between the two; at its best, the Christian faith is just as honest about God as the best science is about nature.

One last word. I have found that nothing is more dangerous to one’s own faith than the work of an apologist. No doctrine of that Faith seems to me so spectral, so unreal as one that I have just successfully defended in a public debate. For a moment, you see, it has seemed to rest on oneself: as a result, when you go away from that debate, it seems no stronger than that weak pillar. That is why we apologists take our lives in our hands and can be saved only by falling back continually from the web of our own arguments, as from our intellectual counters, into the Reality — from Christian apologetics into Christ Himself. That also is why we need One another’s continual help — *oremus pro invicem*.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 104.

<sup>43</sup> 2 Cor. 10:5 (NIV).

<sup>44</sup> Latin, “Let us pray for one another.” C. S. Lewis, “Christian Apologetics,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 103.

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