

**A DEFENSE OF FIRST AND SECOND-ORDER THEISM:
THE LIMITS OF EMPIRICAL INQUIRY
AND THE RATIONALITY OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF**

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Abstract. We argue that the use of the term “supernatural” is problematic in philosophy of religion in general, and in the contribution by Thornhill-Miller and Millican (TMM) in particular. We address the disturbing parallel between Hume’s case against the rationality of belief in miracles and his dismissal of reports of racial equality. We do not argue that because Hume was a racist (or an advocate of white superiority) therefore his view against miracles is faulty, but we draw attention to how Hume sets up a framework that, for similar reasons, discounts evidence of black intelligence and divine intelligence (or evidence of acts of God). We go on to argue against TMM’s revision of Hume on miracles. We then argue that empirical testing on the veracity of petitionary belief is impossible for there is no control case (everyone is prayed for) and that empirical testing can no more evaluate the evidential merits of most religious experiences than it can assess the merits of any robust philosophical position in epistemology, metaphysics, value theory, logic and mathematics. We express doubts about the integrity and scope of how one might enjoy the good of religion without belief. In a final section we offer a defense of the rationality of believing in specific religious traditions based on religious experience along with what we refer to as *sufficient philosophical reasoning*.

Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican advance an important argument against what they characterize as first-order supernatural beliefs but they defend a modest form of second-order supernatural beliefs. This allows educated, reasonable persons to adopt a generally teleological (perhaps even theistic) view of the cosmos and to enjoy some of the benefits of religious belief, but without justifying any more specific theistic or other religious tradition. Janusz Salamon offers a fascinating rejoinder that is no mere rejoinder, but an independent

‘agatheistic’ conception of the nature and structure of religious belief that is fundamentally oriented toward values and what he terms the agathological imagination.

In our contribution to this exchange, we focus on challenging the arguments against first-order supernatural beliefs advanced by Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican (henceforth TMM). Janusz Salamon grants that some of TMM’s points are correct, but we challenge these points. Salamon suggests that rejecting some of these points would be more of a rhetorical rather than philosophical move, and we hope to advance philosophical rather than rhetorical arguments in turn.¹ We leave to another occasion our positive response to Salamon’s constructive alternative philosophy of religion.

There are six sections that follow. In the first, we offer reasons against TMM’s use of the concept and term “supernaturalism.” Section two takes issue with Hume’s own case against miracles, while section three offers criticism of TMM’s revision of Hume. Section four offers reasons why empirical testing of petitionary prayer and religious experience is of very limited use or philosophical significance, just as, in our view, empirical testing cannot settle robust philosophical positions in epistemology, metaphysics, value theory, logic and mathematics. In section five, we express doubts about the integrity and scope of how one might enjoy the good of religion without belief. Section six ends with a defense of the rationality of believing in specific religious traditions based on religious experience when this belief is paired with what we will refer to as *sufficient philosophical reasoning*.

I. A PLEA FOR NOT EMPLOYING THE TERM “SUPERNATURAL” IN ASSESSING RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Given the importance of TMM’s notion of the supernatural – they use the term “supernatural” and “supernaturalism” 118 times – we begin

¹ See “Atheism and Agatheism in the Global Ethical Dialogue” by Janusz Salamon, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 7, no. 4 (2015), 226, p. 200: “Their restrictive approach to the justificatory grounds of religious belief may disappoint some defenders of the rationality of religious belief, but the vision of advocates of various metaphysical outlooks engaging in intellectually honest and genuinely philosophical – rather than merely rhetorical – debate, involving readiness to admit that there are objective limits to the strengths of the arguments supporting one’s own position, may provide a model of a constructive atheism/religion debate.”

with observations about the concept of the supernatural.²

“Supernaturalism” (and its cognates) is not the standard philosophical term in referencing God or the divine or sacred in philosophical literature. Nor is it common in theology. Perhaps using the term “supernaturalism” might be welcome if the term appears in religious belief and practice, but the term does not appear in much, if any, practicing religions that we know of. For example, in the largest religion in the world, Christianity, the term “supernatural” does not occur in any of its scripture, creeds or rituals. This alone does not provide good reason for not using the term, just as philosophers use the term “dualist” to describe a host of thinkers (including Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Descartes) who never used the term.^{3 4} There is a clear distinction between retroactively applying a term to thinkers who are no longer active and attributing the term to extant thinkers, but we still concede that even if almost none of the religions TMM discuss use the term “supernatural” this alone is not sufficient to find the term suspect. We propose that the use of the term “supernatural” has three drawbacks in philosophical reflection on the credibility of religious belief.

First, the use of the term “supernatural” does not entail, but it suggests that we have a clear understanding of what is natural, and implies that the “supernatural” is in some way beyond nature, not natural or unnatural. How could we know what is clearly supernatural if we lack a clear consensus about the definition of natural? For something to be unnatural, we most likely need to know what constitutes the natural. Many philosophers in classical Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and theistic Hinduism have claimed natural features to their beliefs: these include, but are not limited to, notions of the Divine nature or to the nature of God or Allah or Brahman, as well as natural law or purpose.

There is limited clarity about what counts as “natural.” Many philosophers recognize today, we currently lack a clear consensus on

² TMM use the term “supernaturalism” 19 times, and “supernatural” 99 times: compare this with Salamon’s reply paper where “supernaturalism” is used twice and “supernatural” is used 21 times. See: Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican, “The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma: Revisions of Humean Thought, New Empirical Research, and the Limits of Rational Religious Belief”, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 7, no. 1 (2015), pp. 1-49. Subsequent references to this work are footnoted as “TMM” followed by page number.

³ For an example, consider Nussbaum, M. C., 1984, ‘Aristotelian Dualism’, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 2: 197–207.

⁴ Incidentally, we think the term “dualism” in these contexts is misleading (also).

what counts as nature or the natural. This is especially borne out by those who observe the impact of current physics on our ordinary concept of the natural or what counts as physical or material. Anthony Kenny, probably the greatest living historian of philosophy, observes:

At one time it seemed as if a robust and substantive naturalism could be easily stated. This was a conception that thought of the world as being made up of solid, inert, impenetrable and conserved matter – a matter that interacts deterministically and through contact. But twentieth-century physics posited entities and interactions that did not fit the materialist characterization of reality, and which took science far away from a world of solid, inert, massy material atoms.⁵

Adding to Kenny's observation, consider Michel Bitbol's claim: "Material bodies are no longer the basic objects of physics... Ironically, the notion of material body motivated the very research that eventually dissolved it."⁶ Tim Crane and D.H. Mellor write: "The 'matter' of modern physics is not at all solid, or inert, or impenetrable, or conserved, and it interacts indeterministically and arguably some times as a distance. Faced with these discoveries, modern materialism's descendants have understandably lost their metaphysical nerve."⁷ Galen Strawson and Noam Chomsky similarly lament the lack of a clear understanding of what is material or natural. Chomsky observes that "The notion of the 'physical world' is open and evolving."⁸ We are not suggesting that there is a clear consensus on the meaning of God as conceived of in theism, but there seems to be more confidence and consensus in understanding divine attributes in theistic tradition than there is in extant developments of the attributes of the natural world.⁹ Bertrand Russell went so far as to propose that our concept of the paranormal is, in some respects, no less bizarre than

⁵ Anthony Kenny, "Faith in Lions," *The Times Literary Supplement*, Number 5751, June 21st, 2013, 3-4.

⁶ Bitbol, Michel. 2007. "A More Radical Critique of Materialism: A Dialogue with Bas van Fraassen About Matter, Empiricism and Transcendentalism." *Images of Empiricism, Essays on Science and Stances, with a Reply from Bas van Fraassen*, Oxford University Press.

⁷ Tim Crane and D.H. Mellor, "There is no question of physicalism," in *Contemporary Materialism: A Reader*, ed. Paul K. Moser and J.D Trout (London: Routledge, 1995), 66.

⁸ Chomsky, Noam (1980). *Rules and Representations*: New York: Columbia University Press.

⁹ See, for example, *The Routledge Companion to Theism* ed by C. Taliaferro, V. Harrison, and S. Goetz (London: Routledge, 2012).

the concept of the physical world as revealed in the physical sciences. “Matter has become as ghostly as anything in a spiritual séance.”¹⁰

Second, related to the first point, the term “supernaturalism” is employed by critics of theism to construe *the supernatural* as in some way a distorted, derived concept of that which is natural and material. Wesley Wildman is representative of this (in our view) hostile description of theism. In *Science and Religious Anthropology*, Wildman refers to theistic (or “supernatural”) worldviews as centered on “discarnate intentional beings,” “disembodied forms of intentionality,” and “disembodied causal powers.”¹¹ Terms like “discarnate” or “disembodied” suggest that some thing (a being or power) lacks some quality and is (possibly) damaged or disfigured. Why not refer to theism as simply upholding the reality of a divine intentional, purposive power or, employing terms that distinguish God from (what we assume to be) material objects, to claim that this intentional, purposive power (God) is *transcendent* or *incorporeal*? “Incorporeal” does not, in our judgment, come with the same pejorative connotation (“baggage”) as “disembodied” for, according to classical forms of Christianity (in the Platonic Christian tradition) human persons are themselves incorporeal, albeit fully embodied as a functional unity in this life.¹²

Third, the way in which the “supernatural” as a category is currently defined in English, includes not just God as conceived of in Abrahamic faiths. It also includes ghosts, spooks, vampires, telepathy, astro-projection, witches, Delphic oracles, dead ancestral spirits, poltergeists, and so on. This large set of possibly supernatural entities ultimately is not related to the research referenced by TMM. They write about the benefits of religious belief, but they do not write about the benefits of belief in ghosts and telepathy etc. In order for the deployment of *supernaturalism* to be constructive in their argument, we believe they would need to include evidence that not only theistic beliefs but also more peculiar, supernatural aspirations, provide individual and social benefits (or not). Since neither they, nor we, intend to comment on the full set of supernatural claims, we believe it is imprecise and unhelpful to deploy the term. Further, because the set of what is supernatural includes such

¹⁰ Russell, Bertrand (1927). *An Outline of Philosophy*. London: Routledge.

¹¹ See his *Science and Religious Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 2009).

¹² For an articulation of different conceptions of human and divine nature see *The Ashgate Companion to Theological Anthropology* ed by J. Farris and C. Taliaferro (Ashgate 2014).

oddities, there is a tendency to associate what is supernatural with that which is superstitious.¹³ There are several culturally significant examples of the term “supernatural” being employed as a synonym for “beyond one’s current understanding” or “incomprehensible” until a naturalistic explanation is provided.¹⁴ Therefore using the term “supernatural” seems very close to being what in philosophy is called a *persuasive definition*, a term that employs a (in this case controversial) value judgment.¹⁵

We believe that in philosophy of religion, especially, it is important to use a golden rule of treating the other person’s philosophy in the same way you would like your own to be treated. While TMM express a keen respect for appreciating what may be the benefits of and (on a certain level) the rationality of religious belief, we believe that a further step that might be taken is to use the terms that have been introduced to describe religious traditions since the very start of philosophy being carried out in English, terms that do not carry pejorative baggage. The first extensive writing in English by philosophers on religion was carried out by the Cambridge Platonists, from whom we get terms like *theism*, *philosophy of religion*, and even *consciousness*.¹⁶ We commend this heritage.

As an aside, while we take issue with TMM’s use of the term “supernatural,” we complement them for not using terms that Wildman uses in his naturalistic critique of theism like “a personal deity” and “anthropomorphic conception of ultimate reality.” No theists we know of (at least theists who are philosophically active) historically or today refer to the God of Abrahamic tradition as (using the lower case) “a personal God,” albeit classical Christians have and do refer to the Godhead as constituted by three Persons. And, of course, no theist believes the concept of God in classical tradition is “anthropomorphic.” It is classically held

¹³ Consider the popular TV show titled “Supernatural” It’s 5.7 million viewers see the title as descriptive of the content: wherein two brothers battle demons, ghouls, and vampires.

¹⁴ Consider, as an example, Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Hound of Baskerville” within which the hound is perceived as a supernatural being before Sherlock Holmes conquers the superstition by solving the case.

¹⁵ Examples of “persuasive definitions include “naïve realism” and “shallow ecology” or “anthropocentrism” Few persons who defend direct realism in epistemology or humanism in environmental ethics or value theory would want to refer to themselves as naïve or shallow.

¹⁶ See Hutton, Sarah, “The Cambridge Platonists”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/cambridge-platonists/>>.

that humans are made in the image of God, but not that God is made in the image of humans, as the Feuerbachian tradition claims.¹⁷

II. WEIGHING THE EVIDENCE WITH DAVID HUME

We commend TMM on weeding through some interpretations of Hume on miracles. One of us has argued in multiple places that there is a significant parallel between Hume's disparaging of reports of miracles and reports of intelligent black Africans.¹⁸ As is widely known, Hume believed in the supremacy of whites over blacks and, despite the widespread availability of evidence of black equality with whites, he preferred reductive explanations of positive reports about blacks' capacities.¹⁹ Here is a famous claim by Hume about what he takes to be the natural inferiority of blacks to whites.

I am apt to suspect the Negroes and, in general, all of the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient Germans, the present Tartars, have all still something eminent about them, in their valor, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are Negro slaves dispersed all over Europe, of which none ever discovered any symptoms

¹⁷ See Solomon, Robert C. *What Nietzsche Really Said* (Random House, Inc., New York, 2000) pp 87 "Attributing human traits to God, human beings have disowned their own powers and accordingly have lost awareness of how to use them. Human beings have become estranged from themselves. Feuerbach urges that we rediscover our own capacities and reinternalize our projected powers. Until we do so, we will continue to be victims of our own conviction that we ourselves are powerless and utterly dependent."

¹⁸ See "Hume's Racism and his case against the Miraculous" by C. Taliaferro and A. Hendrickson, *Philosophia Christi* 4:2 (2002), 427-441.

¹⁹ See "Hume's Racism and his case against the Miraculous" for details about the evidence Hume had to ignore when it came to the availability of cases of black intelligence. Hume's racism has been widely commented on in multiple places by Richard Popkin. See, for example, Popkin's "Hume's Racism" in *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, ed. by J.F. Fare (San Diego, 1980). See also "Race and Racism in the works of David Hume" by Eric Morton, *Journal on African Philosophy*, 1999.

of ingenuity, tho' low people without education will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In Jamaica indeed they talk of one Negro as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.²⁰

The Jamaican Hume refers to was Francis Williams who graduated from Cambridge University and was widely known as a poet of Latin verse.²¹ Note how ready Hume is to provide an alternative account of Williams' apparent skill as an intelligent, thoughtful person that grants him no more skills than a parrot. Hume seems just as ready to dismiss reports of intelligent blacks as to dismiss miracle stories due to an errant imagination or any number of non-cognitive factors (e.g. misplaced hopes and fears, cognitive biases, lack of critical judgement ...).

Hume might be accused of merely making a hasty generalization about all blacks based on a small sampling, but we suggest that Hume was so entrenched in his negative view of black lives that he felt free to ignore the massive amount of evidence available to him if he had ventured outside his circle of friends and acquaintances. There were well over ten thousand blacks (most of whom were free) living in London during Hume's lifetime who were engaged in many intellectual activities, including writing (some of whom were employed by Samuel Johnson) and studying.²² Yet this evidence seemed completely beyond Hume. For example, Phillis Wheatley, a black American poet, was sent to England to write poems in public and otherwise give public demonstrations of black intelligence and feeling. Popkin writes about Hume on Wheatley "Hume was either oblivious or unimpressed. He never changed his view about blacks. Hume's views were quoted over and over again in America by defenders of slavery and opponents of abolition. They would say, "As the eminent philosopher, David Hume ..."²³ We may have here what Popkin himself thinks is an empiricist who is not sufficiently empirical. We believe this supports the possibility that Hume was willing to reject

²⁰ David Hume, "Of National Characters" in T.H Green and T.H Grose (eds) *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, Vol. 3 (London: Longmans, 1886), p. 252.

²¹ MacDermot, T.H. 'From a Jamaica Portfolio – Francis Williams'. *Journal of Negro History* (April 1917), 147-59.

²² G. Gerzina, *Blacks in London: Life Before Emancipation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 5. (predictions of black population in London run from 10,000-30,000).

²³ Popkin, "Eighteenth-Century Racism," p. 512.

substantial evidence on thin theoretical grounds instead of giving a full account of that evidence, as it is. We do not claim to be able to read Hume's motives, but Hume's level of confidence that it is unreasonable to recognize black intelligence seems to us to be as high as Hume's level of confidence that it will always be more reasonable to distrust stories of divine intelligence (miracles) and Kant's own assertions that blacks are categorically inferior to whites on a transcendental level. (Kant was open, in principle, to the rationality of believing in miracles, but he had such an entrenched view of the inferior nature of black persons, he had an antipathy to evidence of black equality very similar to Hume's methodological disposition to doubt both reports of black positive capacities and reports of miracles.)²⁴

In our view, there is a profound parallel between Hume's lack of sympathy for reports of black intelligence and his lack of sympathy for reported miracles. Thus, in the following narrative, Hume's case of an ostensible miracle that may have sufficient justification lacks any hint at teleology or purpose. The so-called "miracle" seems more like a freak event. There is not the slightest effort to make his case of world-wide total darkness even remotely akin to any miracle narrative.

For I own, that otherwise, there may possibly be miracles, or violations of the usual course of nature, of such a kind as to admit of proof from human testimony; though, perhaps, it will be impossible to find any such in all the records of history. Thus, suppose, all authors, in all languages, agree, that, from the first of January, 1600, there was a total darkness over the whole earth for eight days: suppose that the tradition of this extraordinary event is still strong and lively among the people: that all travellers, who return from foreign countries, bring us accounts of the same tradition, without the least variation or contradiction: it is evident, that our present philosophers, instead of doubting the fact, ought to receive it as certain, and ought to search for the causes whence it might be derived. The decay, corruption, and dissolution of nature, is an event rendered probable by so many analogies, that any phenomenon, which seems to have a tendency towards that catastrophe, comes within the reach of human testimony, if that testimony be very extensive and uniform.²⁵

²⁴ See "The Colour of Reason" by Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze in *Post Colonial African Philosophy* (Blackwells, 1996) pp. 50-83.

²⁵ David Hume (1711–76). *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. in Steven M. Cahn (ed.) "Seven Masterpieces of Philosophy," (London: Routledge 2016) pg. 255.

These considerations give us reason to resort again to a Golden Rule in philosophy. We submit that the above narrative does not have any proper analogy to any religiously significant miracle reports.²⁶ A more challenging case for Hume or for a Humean would be to imagine the following: Imagine we have some positive reasons for thinking there is an all-powerful, all-good Creator. There are many reports, historically and today, that this Creator God has been revealed experientially across many times and cultures. In one lifetime, a figure who claimed to speak for or as this God incarnate has been believed to be experienced as a resurrected presence, and so on. We will not labor readers with more details, only taking note of how easily narratives can be constructed to offer analogies that invoke ostensible divine teleology rather than rely on Hume's freaky, ostensibly pointless events.²⁷

III. DOES A REVISED ACCOUNT OF HUME'S CRITIQUE OF MIRACLES WORK?

TMM accommodate the purpose of miracles, to an extent, by seeing them as confirmations of religious beliefs. They argue that, in a context of multiple belief systems claiming different miracles, it is the incompatibility of the belief systems that generates a good reason to not believe in miracles: "the contradictions between different religious belief systems ... persuasively challenge the rationality of most kinds of supernatural belief."²⁸ We believe that the incompatibility between belief systems

²⁶ This may be partly due to the fact that the way Hume defines what is a miracle makes no reference to the purpose of a miracle. Hume identifies miracles as brought about by God as a violation of nature. No reference is made to a miracle's function as a revelation or as some sign of divine goodness. Further, it seems any global event that lasted several days could be attested to with more confidence than any localized event in history.

²⁷ The problem with Hume on miracles is that his very definition of what it is to be a miracle (as a violation of a law of nature) makes no reference to teleology. All the classical cases of miracle stories we have in Biblical and Christian tradition are each constructed to advance some meaningful, intentional, purposive end, such as the display of love and mercy in a healing narrative or they consist of events that authenticate Christ's teaching or they augment a prophecy calling persons to repent and so on. Given Hume's formal definition of a miracle, a miracle could occur if God were to alter the position of an electron when this was not in accord with the relevant laws of physics on a distant planet with no observers and no consequences of any ethical or religious or aesthetic significance. From a religious point of view, to call such an event a miracle would be absurd.

²⁸ TMM 1.

should not be an overwhelming concern and this can be demonstrated by applying the same dilemma to naturalistic belief systems as well. There are an astonishing number of various naturalist claims that are incompatible – not only the bizarre, such as the Loch Ness monster, bigfoot, UFOs, what people see in Acid trips, the paranoid claims of one suffering from mental delusion etc – but also more commonplace considerations about, for instance, the different naturalistic accounts of human persons. We make note of this below in observing how competing theories of mind in naturalism can create a problem, if we use TMM standards. If theism must be evaluated in light of all “supernatural claims” and the consequent ambiguities and incoherences between competing claims then why can’t naturalism be evaluated in the same light? Our comment about naturalism and the divergence problem resembles Campbell’s critique of Hume, as we believe using the divergence dilemma to disprove miracles would generate objectionable results when used on disputes between naturalists.²⁹

It’s important to remember that TMM’s revision of Hume’s critique of miracles relies not on distinctions between miracles themselves but on incompatibilities between the propositional claims of various religions that miracles are supposed to confirm. As they phrased it, if M1 (Miracle 1) is supposed to confirm R1 (Religion 1) and M2 is supposed to confirm R2, then the conflict between R1 and R2 leads them to undermine each other and, consequently, undermine the truth of both M1 and M2.³⁰ However, the conflict between the interpretations was not itself explained in great detail. For example, should we distinguish between miracles that support a religious claim and miracles that are *the only* confirmation of a religious claim? Do TMM assume that miracles are the only evidence for these competing religious claims? We believe this problem of interpreting events could apply equally to both naturalism and “supernaturalism.”

First, if a miracle is disproven by a conflict in interpretations then the same miracle could undermine itself so long as two religions (or more) both see it as confirming their theories. Imagine that members of three religions all witnessed multiple children, from multiple religions, be saved from a fire that miraculously stopped burning, with no naturalistic explanation available. The members of those religions might each see

²⁹ TMM 11.

³⁰ TMM 16.

this miracle as evidence that the God they believe in exists and that their religion is true. But it may not be the case that this miracle is evidence that all three religions are true; however, the competing intellectual content and propositional claims of the religions does not undermine the fact that this event happened. Even if each of these three believers wants their religion to be true, and thus has reason to deny the miracle claim of the others, it nonetheless remains possible that two of them are wrong or that all three of them are wrong. Thus, the miracle may be undeniable to multiple faiths while there is a conflict in the interpretation of the miracle. To say that incoherence between doctrines establishes that the miracle did not happen, even when all three faiths could (in principle) agree that it did, is misguided.³¹

Second, if incompatibilities between theories surrounding an event ought to undermine the existence of that specific event, then this would present a very serious problem for naturalists. For instance, there are many naturalists who disagree about what constitutes the human mind, or if the mind even exists. This is especially true when we consider the different naturalistic interpretations of human minds at any given time in history, as TMM do with miracles. They follow Hume in assuming the divergence problem accounts for not only divergent religions during the same time period but, instead, all religions accross time. If a behaviorist, an eliminativist and a naturalistic dualist (like C. J. Ducasse who was a dualist atheist) see a person wince in pain, they (by their lights) have confirmation for very different theories.³² Both the behaviorist and naturalistic dualist want their theories to be true as well, and thus take the wincing in pain as proof of their theories.³³ If the conflict between T1 (Theory one) and T2 (Theory two) undermines E1 (Event 1) and E2 (Event 2) then the proper conclusion is that no one winced in pain (or appeared to wince in pain) in front of either the behaviorilist or the naturalistic dualist.

It would seem reasonable to have faith in the prospect of determining whether the behaviorlist or naturalistic dualist is correct about their

³¹ It is true that, for the sake of argument, TMM consider direct experience of miracles to be a plausible source of knowledge. While our example assumes direct experience, the point is not about the encounter with the miracle, it is about how we are to assess competing, incompatible claims.

³² Ducasse, C. J.: "In Defense of Dualism" in *Dimensions of Mind*, Sydney Hook, ed. (Macmillan, NY 1961).

³³ See Skinner, B. F, 1974. *About Behaviorism*, New York: Vintage.

understanding of the person. The mere incompatibility of their views does not indicate that no one winced in pain in front of either of them. So the diversity dilemma, in and of itself, should not be treated as a reason for religious believers to forfeit their faith in miracles.

One reply might be that TMM are discussing miracles that the believer in question has not seen him or herself. Therefore, this distance between the believer and the miracle makes the conflict very different from the conflict between people who share the same data but merely disagree about what it reveals or means. We believe that this reply, rather than support TMMs argument, would successfully return the question back to whether or not testimonies of miracles ought to be trusted, and under which conditions they can be. This question must remain distinct, we believe, from the incompatible content of religions themselves.

Finally, TMM argue, it is the believer who wants to claim that the other religions are false and that the miracles used to prove it are false – but, since the multiple religions have the same epistemic grounding for their miracles (testimony), the believer would also have to conclude that the miracles related to their own religion are false if they reject the miracles of other religions.³⁴ As they phrased it, “The point here is not that Christian believers are logically compelled to deny the miracles of rival religions (as the contrary religions argument would suggest), but rather, that these believers will in fact want to deny them.”³⁵ The problem, structurally, is that the conflict that matters is between the non-miraculous content of religions. So it seems perfectly coherent for a believer to say that they don’t believe the testimony of a miracle for a religion that generates other false claims. For instance, if one believed (for religious reasons) that all men are created equal they could legitimately reject, as false, the testimony of a miracle for another religion that proposed that the world should be divided into a hierarchy between men (perhaps racially or class divided). It would precisely be the false content, as they understand it, of the other religion that increases their skepticism about the testimony of miracles for the other religion. It is not the testimony itself, but the testimony paired with false conclusions on other matters. Since testimony is based on trust, it is reasonable not to trust the testimony within a tradition that you believe to have propagated other false claims. Thus, it would precisely be the divergence between the religions that makes it coherent

³⁴ TMM 19.

³⁵ TMM 19.

to deny the miracle claim of another faith while not denying the miracle claim of one's own.³⁶ We are not advocating that a believer thinks this way, instead we are assuming the condition explained by TMM – that a believer does not want other religions to be true. Since the problem TMM present involves the perspective of the believer, we think it is important to note that, should one be concerned with the falsehood of other religions, then they could rationally reject the miracles of other faiths without rejecting the miracles of their own faith.

Since TMM are keen to rehabilitate and revise the dialogue between “supernaturalists” and naturalists, we believe this endeavor will be more fruitfully undertaken if the reasons given for rejecting supernaturalism (again, we prefer to use the term *theism*) are ones that can be universally applied.

IV. CAN ONE EMPIRICALLY ASSESS THE VERACITY OF PETITIONARY PRAYER AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE?

We think it deeply problematic to suppose that empirical inquiry can establish whether or not petitionary prayer is effective and that is, in part, because there are no control groups. There is no one on earth who is not prayed for. In the *Book of Common Prayer*, prayers are offered for all people in their daily life and work, all who are (or have or will) suffer, and so on.³⁷ Empirical evidence about persons on distant planets would not be a control group, insofar as they are persons and all persons are prayed for.

What about religious experience? According to theism, God is not a biological or social object or chemical or force field that could, in principle, be detected in natural or social sciences. God is believed to be omnipresent; there is no place where God is not. In an authentic case in which God is experienced, would there have to be something that is empirically identifiable when God is not experienced? There might be some empirical work that is relevant. Imagine we have good independent philosophical reasons for believing that God is all good

³⁶ We are aware that this point fails to comment on TMM's point against accepting all miracles as true, but we believe they are right to claim that this would indeed be a peculiar and unlikely reply to the dilemma. (see TMM 19-21)

³⁷ see Church of England (1662), *The Book of Common Prayer*, London: Everyman's Library (published 1999).

and we have empirical evidence that someone claims to experience God commanding what is evidently vile and ethically abhorrent. In that case, empirical evidence with the help of a theological framework may have some evidential bearing. But in base-line judgements about whether God exists or not, it is hard to see how empirical inquiry can be successful. If the empiricist or scientist claims to have evidence that persons would believe there is a God (or have apparent experiences of God) even if there is no God, this counter-factual would be unintelligible, given theism. According to perfect being theology (Anselmian theism), God exists necessarily; there is no possible world in which God does not exist. Empirical inquiry typically works in the context of contingent matters (when there can be control groups, etc), but God's every being is non-contingent such that if it is granted that it is even possible (metaphysically) that God does not exist, it follows (for most, but not all theists) God necessarily does not exist.³⁸

The problem facing empirical inquiry into authenticating the likelihood of God's existence is similar to the problem for psychological explanations of necessary entailment relations (logic or mathematics). The truth of the claims "Necessarily, if proposition P entails Q and P is true, then Q is true" or "Necessarily, 6 is the smallest perfect number" are manifestly not evidentially resting on psychological testing of how actual human beings reason, for even if it were found that the vast majority of human beings thought these were not the case, any person capable of understanding logic and mathematics would have abundant, self-evident reasons for knowing the majority of human beings are wrong. Necessarily 6 is the smallest perfect number because it is the smallest number equal to the sum of its divisors, including 1, but not including itself ($6=1+2+3$), not because the majority of human beings happen to think this is the case. Note the parallel absurdity of these two claims: "Persons would believe and ostensibly experience God even if there is no God" and "Persons would believe and ostensibly think it necessary that 6 is the smallest perfect number, even if 6 is not the smallest perfect number."³⁹

We suggest that the limited use of empirical inquiry in settling main issues in philosophy of religion is not unique to that domain of

³⁸ See *Contemporary Philosophical Theology* by C. Taliaferro and C. Meister. (London: Routledge, 2016).

³⁹ See Gottlob Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1950).

philosophy, but also concerns deep matters in metaphysics, epistemology, value theory, philosophy of language, and other sub-fields. We suggest that empirical inquiry could not settle the question of the existence of abstract objects, an A and B theory of time, moral realism, the merits of external versus internal epistemology, and so on. Back to philosophy of religion and to summarize: we do not see how empirical study can confirm when a person's sense of God is generated from HADD versus the result of a largely reliable, mature awareness of the reality of a transcendent, divine reality.⁴⁰ ⁴¹In general, we note, TMM's research simultaneously claims to comment on issues "beyond nature" (evidenced by employing the term "supernatural") yet treats them as objects which must be found "within nature." If God exists beyond or above nature, as they appear to claim, then it would be difficult to assess how to find God within nature as one among many natural items in this world.

V. ENJOYING THE GOODS OF RELIGION WITHOUT BELIEF

We are skeptical of the idea that one can reasonably appreciate the individual and social benefits of a belief system without seeing any legitimate merit to the content of those beliefs. Doing so sounds eerily similar to the promotion of a fool's paradise or Brave New World. If the reason for taking faith seriously is primarily for the individual/social benefits (despite likely falsehood) then it would seem that faith shouldn't be taken too seriously in the end. Many dystopian works (*The Giver*, *Brave New World* etc.) rely on a common intuition that sacrificing the truth for individual and social gain is objectionable.

We don't assume that TMM necessarily share this intuition, but we would like to know whether or not they do. We believe there is a notable parallel between their interpretation of supernatural claims and Marx' interpretation, insofar as they claim religion, for the most part, is generated out of material (or natural) conditions that are not connected with the truth of the religious claims.⁴² These conditions, as they understand it, are more likely to be psychological and biological

⁴⁰ For articulation of TMM's use of HADD see TMM 19-21

⁴¹ Our critical stance on empirical inquiry should not be seen as a criticism of phenomenology. See *Contemporary Philosophical Theology*. by C. Taliaferro and C. Meister. (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁴² Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, *The German Ideology* (Progress Publishers, Moscow) 1975, p. 36.

rather than socio-economic.⁴³ Nonetheless, if supernatural claims are epiphenomenal to natural conditions instead of reflective of possible truths, then sponsoring the promotion of religion (even in an altered version) amounts to preserving something that is most likely an illusion on the grounds of its benefits.

We believe the value placed on the individual and social benefits of religious belief could influence their work in three ways. First, TMM conclude that it is worth finding a sufficiently rational form of religion because of the individual and social benefits.^{44,45} We wonder if this is related to a legitimate possibility of religion being true or if it is motivated merely by the individual and social benefits?⁴⁶ If it is motivated primarily by the outlined benefits, then we are curious to know whether or not

⁴³ TMM (24) "Further investigations into the biological basis of these experiences has revealed that appropriately identified religious experiences appear to activate a family of neurobiological systems that are also involved in non-religious functions.⁵⁰ Ingesting neurotheogens like psilocybin under appropriate conditions can also produce experiences qualitatively indistinguishable from spontaneously occurring religious experiences,⁵¹ or from those induced by meditation and prayer.⁵² And psychometric studies, making extensive use of the standard measurement of religious or mystical experience,⁵³ have shown factor structures supporting the existence of a common core to religious experience in samples of Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist populations, from different continents and with varying understandings of the origin and nature of their experiences, from within their different cultural, religious, and linguistic traditions."

⁴⁴ TMM (46-47) "From a rational, empirically-informed point of view, there seem to be two plausible ways forward: walking a path either of scepticism or of reconciliation ... But in the meantime, it is not obviously *unreasonable* to base one's religious commitments on this optimistic second-order theistic view, as long as it remains unrefuted and seems to bring substantial psychological and social benefits."

⁴⁵ See David M. Wulff, *Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary*, 2nd edn (Oxford, England: John Wiley and Sons, 1997), p. 135 referenced in TMM (45): "Religion may be necessary for ordinary people ... [because some aspects of it] could be replaced only through an extraordinary management effort".

⁴⁶ It is worth noting that TMM's apparent understanding of second-order theism, based on Skinner's own near-retirement view as effectively managerial resembles a common misconception of Marx's own account of religion as an opiate. For Marx, religion serves as an essential relief from the psychological alienation of wage-labour and not as a system of social control. But assuming that Skinner's position is adopted by TMM, the second-order theism advocated in their paper descends into a fool's paradise in which the less educated, less rational are herded into cohesivity. When viewed through this particular lense, with societal and intellectual leaders seemingly accepting faith as a simple expedience to such cohesion, it is difficult to avoid seeing the dystopic scenarios realised should the societal elite be aware that second-order theism is the only rational option while encouraging the less-educated to believe in the irrational, for managerial reasons.

there is substantial evidence that second order theism would produce the same benefits as first-order theism? If the research referenced predominantly discusses first-order supernatural belief systems, then it is possible that something within them (the tradition, miracles, or immediacy of the divine in experiences that confirm that tradition for the experient) could uniquely contribute to the outlined benefits while second-order theism (lacking those conditions) can not. We are not committed to this being the case, but we feel that it would be difficult to assume that second-order theism will generate the same results solely on the basis that it shares some (but not all) of the qualities of first-order theism. If evidence were to demonstrate that second-order theism does not produce the same results as first-order theism, then we would like to know whether they would encourage first-order beliefs (despite its irrationality in their view) or promote second-order theism (despite lack of social benefits)? Could there be, for instance, a form of first-order beliefs that is more rational than others in their view which would then offer a middle-ground?

Second, we believe the common core interpretation of religion (as TMM present it) runs the risk of overlooking the possibility of living in a “fool’s paradise” along with the possibility of one form of first-order supernaturalism being more rational than another. It may be the case that there are multiple religious experiences that share a common feature, but we believe this would not give a grounding for rejecting first order religious claims as much as it would ground a concern for whether or not some are living in a fool’s paradise while others are not.

The assumption behind the common core interpretation is that demonstrating a common condition involved, perhaps necessary for, specific kinds of religious experiences would demonstrate that those experiences are primarily caused by that common feature rather than revealing that feature to be a part of a larger causal nexus.⁴⁷ This assumption overestimates the role of common core by positing it as the *only or fundamental* source of the experience rather than as a part of the causal chain related to the experience. Before explaining this as it relates to “supernaturalism”, I would like to apply the same assumption to a set

⁴⁷ TMM (28). Here the diversity in detail of afterlife beliefs tends to undermine them all as revelatory of metaphysical truth, while their similarities point, not towards a genuinely supernatural basis, but rather, towards a common natural cause: the human experience of NDEs across all cultures and epochs.”

of non-supernatural narratives. For example, feeling in a trusting state towards others (perhaps including the common features of (A) Trust and (B) Oxytocin.⁴⁸

Imagine the following: three different people (Persons A, B and C) are experiencing the sensation of trust. Person A had lost an item that was then returned to her by a total stranger who she then hugged: both the returning of the wallet and the hug itself triggered the release of oxytocin which thus made her feel trusting. Person B, on the other hand, recently learned that his wife of 20 years was NOT having an affair, and then enjoyed an intimate evening with her. The news and the intimacy triggered a release of oxytocin and thus a state of trust. Person C, unlike the others, had no interpersonal reason for trust. He was actually in a room where a chemical triggering the release of oxytocin was sprayed and then he felt more trusting towards those around him. The three narratives undeniably share the common connection of having the release of oxytocin promote a trusting state but they do not have the same basis for why the oxytocin was released: to say they did would require denying the clear distinctions between the narratives responsible for their trusting state.

We believe this thought experiment illustrates that one can espouse a common core to a plurality of experiences, but accuracy requires that we attend to the narrative of the experience that an individual is going through. This is not merely an extension of the point that context (cultural or otherwise) need to be taken into account or even that a proximate cause is compatible with an ultimate cause. Instead, the various claims and religious experiences themselves need to be evaluated. For instance, imagine that Person B was actually deceived and his wife was in fact having an affair on him. We could say that his state of trust was legitimately false, since the thing that induced it was a lie. Therefore, when discussing the lowered activity of the parietal lobe (a common feature of both the meditative state of Tibetan monks and the prayer state of Franciscan nuns) the distinction in their theory (one group is praying to a God they believe exists, the other is not) should not be too hastily overlooked.⁴⁹ Just as the false trust of person B may mean he is

⁴⁸ M. Kosfeld, M. Heinrichs, P.J. Zak, U. Fischbacher, E. Fehr, "Oxytocin Increases Trust in Humans", *Nature* 435 (7042), 2005, pp. 673-676.

⁴⁹ TMM (25) "One example is that of 'introvertive mystical experience'. Identified as unity devoid of content, or as 'pure consciousness', it arguably must represent a tradition-

living in a fool's paradise, so too a falsely induced religious experience might aptly be called a "fool's paradise." The primary question should not be "is there a common neurological state?" but, rather, "how likely are the claims of the specific religious believers to be true?" By turning our focus away from neurological states in themselves, and towards the propositional content of those going through religious experiences, we could have a more precise dialogue about religion that can comment meaningfully on the distinctions between first-order belief systems.

In order for the narrative and content of the experience to be considered in the way we suggest, we must allow for two essential possibilities. First, a common core could point either to (A) a common "supernatural" origin that is interpreted differently by different experiencers or (B) common conditions involved in very different religious narratives, each of which is capable of reflecting varying degrees of truth. We believe that there is no *prima facie* reason why consistency of a common feature or condition reveals a natural origin or undermines these two possibilities. Finally, we run the risk of encouraging a fool's paradise when the narrative and content attached to the experient's claims are overlooked.

VI. A DEFENSE OF FIRST ORDER RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

Let's imagine TMM having a first-order religious experience. Imagine the following circumstances:

TMM finished presenting their paper on Hume and petitionary prayer in the Senior Common Room at Oriel College. In the course of walking back to Hertford College, both of them started having a novel, excited sense that some great, loving power was becoming apparent to them. Neither of them reported this at first to the other, but when they got back to the college, one of them said: "You know, I might be losing my mind, but I had the oddest feeling returning to College that I want to pray. Why would I feel this way?" "I have no idea," the other replied.

transcending 'common core' since it is an emptying experience – wordless, thoughtless, and not constructed by language. 57 Although more work needs to be done on this topic, when Andrew Newberg and colleagues conducted a comparative neuroimaging study on Franciscan nuns praying and Tibetan monks meditating to achieve this state, both groups showed decreased activity in the orientation association area of the parietal lobe. 58 This part of the brain's right hemisphere provides the sense of body and spatial orientation, so when it shuts down, the body seems no longer aware of its boundaries or of space and time, making the self appear to merge with all things."

“But I am feeling that I need to be open to something larger than myself, something great, transcendent, something powerfully real. It’s none of that rubbish that Wildman writes about how the God of theism is some kind of disembodied spook. Frankly, it is more like the sense of the numinous that Rudolf Otto went on about.” His friend swore: “Jesus Christ!” but then he laughed: “Maybe I actually should take this Jesus stuff seriously. My aunt sent me C.S. Lewis’s *Surprised by Joy*.”

At that point, a chaplain passed by who said “It is an enchanting evening.” TMM both asked at once “Did you say it was an evening to be chanting?” “Why, no,” said the chaplain, but he added, “I am on my way to hear a choir chanting the Magnificat. Care to join?” “Why not?” As the words were chanted, TMM found themselves experiencing the words as not merely sonorous but as communicative or revelatory. One reported to the other “I am not sure of a lot of things like the Virgin birth or the incarnation, but I am starting to feel addressed through this chanting by a divine power.”

Let’s imagine the above took place. We think that a sustained experience of what appears to subjects to be the divine would be reasonable to trust this ostensible divine disclosure if accompanied by *sufficient philosophical reflection*. What would be sufficient philosophical reflection? We think the following would suffice: Imagine the experiencers believe that theism or belief in a transcendent divine reality is a live philosophical option. In other words, they have considered theism and believe that there are no compelling reasons for thinking it false. They also believe that there is some (not compelling or overwhelming) but some evidence for thinking theism is true. They, finally, do not believe that an alternative, non-theistic worldview is more reasonable than theism. We can add the assumption that the experiencers are reasonably proficient in philosophical thinking, and thus had cautiously considered the questions above. In this case, we believe that these subjects would be justified in believing and practicing a specific religious tradition. Assuming the experiencers are philosophically inclined enough to cautiously consider theism and its alternatives before the experience persuades them to believe in theism, we see no objection to their accepting this experience as a form of evidence.

What about the likely existence of other experiencers who are drawn to different religious traditions based on similar experiences? Perhaps the experiencers might be led to make appropriate adjustments of their level of confidence in their emerging religious convictions. That is, they may be reluctant to think they *know* their religion is true versus claiming

that they have a justified belief in its truth.⁵⁰ But in light of their apparent experiential awareness of the divine, we believe it would not be rational for them to reject these appearances as incredible.

Compare the above case with two undergraduates debating the philosophy of mind. They have both read a book that argues, powerfully, that the self does not exist except as a narrative point of gravity. To believe that they exist is to believe in a fiction. They consider whether to believe that their experience as agents in the world stems from an evolutionarily adaptive, but false belief. Their professor tells them they should not rely on what seems like an experience of themselves as agents, for that could be due to their “vivid imagination, driven by hopes and fears, cognitive biases, a lack of critical judgement, and a delight in” narratives about selves. And yet the students persist in their seeming to be directly aware of themselves as agentive subjects. Would it be reasonable for them (under those circumstances) to believe that there has to be something wrong with the professor and the claims that they do not exist? We think it would be abundantly reasonable for them to retain the belief in their own realities as selves.

VII. CONCLUSION

The net conclusion we are arguing for – the rationality of first-order theistic beliefs – is based on a negative line of reasoning to the effect that TMM have not given us good reasons for doubting first-order religious experiences. We don’t believe that either the divergence dilemma, on its own, or the common core dilemma, on its own, amount to a persuasive and compelling philosophical case against the rationality of first-order theistic beliefs. Therefore, we don’t believe that the pairing of the two problems constitutes a philosophically strong reason to reject first-order theism. The positive proposal in this last section has taken the shape of claiming that if TMM were to have certain experiences and have some prior, philosophically justified beliefs, they would be rational in being observant in a specific religious tradition. We could have constructed a different thought experiment that would (in our view) show TMM to be justified on the basis of relevant experiences to be warranted in

⁵⁰ We believe this adjustment is not vastly different from the appropriate stance one takes on many other matters: for example, feeling rationally justified in a belief about a purely scientific discovery but being aware that one could be wrong.

becoming practicing Hindus or Buddhists. In evaluating our position, we note our own conviction that in philosophy it is highly rare to have proofs or arguments or positions that are irrefutable or are widely recognized as compelling. Instead, many philosophical positions and arguments might be reasonable and yet it be the case that there are strong reasons for not accepting their conclusions. We commend Gary Gutting's important book, *What Philosophers Know; Case Studies in Recent Analytic Philosophy*, in which nine cases are analyzed when philosophers in the last century thought their positions were indomitable and obvious, only to show that they were very far from that.⁵¹ We conclude our own work in this essay, not claiming to know we are right, but in claiming that we believe TMM have not shown that first-order theistic beliefs and experiences are not rationally trustworthy. We further claim, with greater confidence, however, that use of the term "supernatural" in philosophy of religion is neither charitable nor helpful.⁵² Finally, we would like to thank TMM for a substantial contribution to Philosophy of Religion.

⁵¹ Gary Gutting, *What Philosophers Know; Case Studies in Recent Analytic Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

⁵² The authors thank Christopher Mills for comments on an earlier version of this paper.