

DEFENDING THE COMMON-CORE/DIVERSITY DILEMMA: ONE AUTHOR'S REPLY TO ABRAM, HEIM, LUKASIEWICZ, MOSER, OPPY, SALAMON, SENOR, TALIAFERRO & POROT

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Branden Thornhill-Miller and I feel tremendously grateful—and honoured—to have received so many interesting and thoughtful critical responses to our paper on “The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma” (henceforth “CCDD”). In writing it, we hoped to provoke discussion and debate, but could not expect that it would provoke so much, and so quickly. As our critics have appreciated, the paper was also itself a *product* of discussion and debate, with the two of us trying to find a position, or range of positions, that we could agree fell within the “rational limits of supernatural belief” (CCDD, 2). This involved significant compromise on both sides, and hence it would be a mistake for any reader to assume that all of the views expressed in the paper can be unequivocally attributed to either of us. At some points, indeed, we felt compelled to highlight that we were attracted towards significantly different paths (2, 5, 46–9), with my own tendency being towards scepticism and naturalism “in the spirit of David Hume” (2), and thus inclined “to ‘bite the bullet’ of cool, parsimonious reason and learn to live with a godless world” (46).

1. EMPATHY, AND LOSS OF FAITH

In at least one case, namely that of the Fine Tuning Argument (to be discussed in §3 below), this context puts me in the unusual situation of being obliged to defend *as rationally respectable* a position of which I am seriously sceptical on intellectual grounds. To be clear in advance, therefore, I do not find this argument persuasive, but it does seem to me legitimately to raise significant

questions that invite (but do not compel) a divine answer. *CCDD*'s references to this argument came from me rather than my co-author,¹ and are there because I cannot imagine personally maintaining a belief in a divine creator without being able to draw on some respectable evidence that can survive critical scrutiny (as, I believe, the vast majority of other theistic arguments and supposed evidence cannot, a topic obviously too big to address further here).² Many people are — for good or ill — less scrupulous in this respect, but many of my philosophical colleagues would no doubt insist on being significantly more scrupulous.³ Again, I should stress that my own inclinations are in the latter direction: we philosophers tend to view it as desirable to base our theoretical views on (what we take to be) fully rational criteria, and are systematically enculturated towards doing so. But in responding to those who would criticise our paper for failing to stick to such a strong “rationalist” line, I would ask them to imagine the situation of someone who is persuaded by the sceptical case but psychologically unable to maintain this; for whom the prospect of casting off all supernatural religious belief seems too much to bear, potentially undermining both their optimism about the universe, and also — perhaps just as significantly — their social context.

Those who have never fallen under the spell of religion might find it surprising how traumatic relinquishing it can be, even for those whose ideals are strongly committed to rationality. My own experience of this was probably relatively mild, because it occurred whilst I was still young, in response to a combination of factors that came together when I was an undergraduate. As

1 Obviously, no implications can be drawn regarding Branden Thornhill-Miller's beliefs from my own views as expressed in this current reply to critics. But the example given here makes clear that even views suggested in the jointly-authored *CCDD* cannot be assumed to be those of either of us individually: the paper involved a great deal of discussion and compromise, to endeavour to reach — as far as possible — positions that both of us felt were rationally sustainable given the philosophical and psychological evidence. Not surprisingly, the philosophical sections II and III (and 46–7 of VIII) mainly reflect my work, while sections IV to VII (and the rest of VIII), focused on empirical and religious studies, mainly reflect my co-author's work. However we discussed and agreed the paper throughout.

2 This answers Taliaferro and Porot: “We are sceptical 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. ... We don't assume that TMM necessarily share this intuition, but we would like to know whether or not they do.” (228).

3 As, for example, Moser (38–9).

a keen and highly involved Anglican, I was shocked on encountering fundamentalist believers at Oxford, and the discovery that otherwise highly intelligent people could reflectively endorse — as literal truth — the moral atrocities and fanciful tales of the Old Testament, made me ponder more seriously than ever before whether my own religious beliefs were reasonably founded. I decided to change subject (from Mathematics) to Philosophy and Theology to sort myself out, after which various events jolted me out of my middle-class complacency into realising how awful the world is for so many people, bringing a new vividness to the Problem of Evil. The theological answers were unconvincing under critical scrutiny, as were the philosophical theistic arguments, while David Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* made many of them seem not only inadequate, but risible. By the time I was studying Philosophy of Religion as an Oxford postgraduate, my theism was evaporating, but — crucially — my nominal Christianity remained, at least for a few years. When my turn came at a postgraduate seminar, I presented a paper arguing that the sincere Christian should be prepared to accept the non-existence of God if that was where the evidence pointed (an idea received more warmly by the Professor of Theology than by the Professor of Philosophy of Religion). Even after moving on to teaching posts elsewhere, I continued to attend church erratically, until the recitation of creeds (whose dubious history I had studied) became just too much to tolerate. Acknowledging that I could no longer call myself a Christian was a serious personal ordeal, even when it was based on so much study and thought, and even though I had most of my life ahead of me, with virtually none of my new social context threatened by my loss of faith. Against this background, I find it relatively easy to empathise with those who feel that their religious commitments, entwined within their lives over decades, are completely impossible to relinquish, whatever contrary theoretical arguments might be presented.

2. BENEFITS OF RELIGION WITHOUT FIRST-ORDER BELIEF?

Perhaps the most controversial suggestion in our paper was the idea that what we call “second-order” religious belief could provide some kind of middle ground here, preserving some of the social and psychological benefits of religion while abandoning the specific “first-order” religious beliefs that are

undermined by the Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma. This idea was treated with great scepticism by most of our critics (Heim, 253–4; Łukasiewicz, 223; Moser, 38–39; Oppy, 262–3; Salamon, 216–30; Taliaferro & Porot, 228–30), and though sympathetic to such scepticism, I take seriously the possibility that second-order religion could indeed suffice to bring such benefits, since I am unaware of empirical evidence that would show otherwise.⁴ Religions come in many varieties (as Oppy stresses in response to Salamon, 260–2), and plenty of people apparently find comfort in superstitious beliefs that would not count as *religious*. Many believers might well identify with Salamon’s view that takes ethics as central to the role of religion (to be discussed in §4 below), but this is by no means universal. Many people also express what might be called “metaphysical” yearnings, for the idea that this world and mortal life are not “all there is”: that the world is not merely material, and there is something beyond or some deeper purpose to it all (whether or not this conforms to any ethical ideal). Moreover such feelings need not be *selfish*, in the sense of yearning for a heavenly future state. It is commonplace for people to devote their lives to their ideals, and even to sacrifice their lives where necessary, an observation not confined to those who expect posthumous reward.

I fully acknowledge that second-order religion as we presented it is likely to be seen as somewhat elitist, “thin” (Salamon, 199; Moser, 38), and “existentially irrelevant” (Salamon, 225), especially if it is interpreted rigorously, refraining from any first-order “contamination”. But that is not the interpretation we were proposing: we were not suggesting a complete divorce from culturally-conditioned religious practices, but rather, that such religious expression should be followed in an “undogmatic and non-prejudicial” spirit (48).⁵ Many religious believers, especially perhaps in the Far East beyond the hegemony of the dominant and exclusivist monotheisms, participate in

4 But I make no claim to special expertise here, and will be interested to see the response of my co-author to relevant points, e.g. McCauley’s work as discussed by Heim (250–3).

5 It may be that several critics have been misled by an unfortunate ambiguity in the text of our paper, where we refer to “second-order theism — or deism — ...” (4). For example, Oppy (259) and Senor (221, n. 5) both read this, not unreasonably, as implying an *equation* between second-order theism and deism, but our intention here was to refer to “second-order (theism or deism)”, to clarify that deism was *included* within the category (but not *required*). Moser (37) also misinterprets our notion of second-order religion, in presuming that it must be entirely non-causal.

combinations of religious practices that are, strictly viewed, incoherent, and often, at least in part, “vulgarly superstitious”.⁶ Buddhism is combined with worshipping the idols of Hinduism or Shinto, for example, apparently meeting both the social and “existential” needs of those concerned, despite the theoretical shortcomings.⁷ At the other extreme from vulgar superstition, Christian Quakerism involves no exclusivist creed, and those involved probably have a wide variety of incompatible views on the status of Jesus and other controversial doctrines. It would presumably be possible for religions in general to move away from dogmatic expression of beliefs and enforced theological purity, to put more emphasis on the social and ceremonial side, and far less on doctrinal orthodoxy.⁸ This might then enable adherents to experience personal fulfilment through a range of “valid spiritual paths”, without any focus on the incompatibility of their “presume[d] metaphysical conditions” (Heim, 247, nn. 35, 37).

Now imagine a participant in such a religious group, who starts with doubts about particular historical teachings and eventually becomes sceptical about whether there is even any supernatural agency in the universe. One can imagine their feeling somewhat conflicted about religious participation, even of the undogmatic kind. Suppose that they later become convinced — through the Fine Tuning Argument, perhaps — that there is some ultimate Designer, albeit one of whom we can know virtually nothing, but who can, not unreasonably, be taken as the implicit focal point of many religions. My expectation is that this new conviction could make a significant difference to such a person, helping to remove their conflicted concerns by giving them confidence that “there is something more” to the universe, and

6 Oppy remarks that “Since Hume wrote his *Natural History of Religion*, it has been a commonplace that ‘vulgar superstitions’ are much better suited to the relief of existential anxiety than are the abstruse deliverances of theologians.” (262–3).

7 Heim also draws attention to this phenomenon (247), apparently viewing it as in tension with our view, which I do not. The only mention of “polytheism” in our paper suggested that it would be unattractive to “any conventional Jew, Christian, or Muslim” (17); perhaps our understanding of what counts as “conventional” differs here.

8 This coheres with Oppy’s suggestion that first-order religion could move towards less authoritative forms that “might be able to deliver the in-group goods without also delivering the out-group damage” (271–2). But note also that undogmatic first-order religious institutions are entirely compatible with individual second-order belief.

hope of a positive purpose to it all.⁹ And although I would not now see myself as being that person, I can imagine an alternative history in which I might have found significant consolation in such a resolution.¹⁰

3. THE FINE TUNING ARGUMENT

In support of our conception of second-order religion, our paper put a modest emphasis on the Fine Tuning Argument, with one brief mention in the abstract (1), three sentences in the introduction (3–4), and a paragraph and footnote in the concluding section (47). This makes a striking contrast with its relative prominence in the critical responses, where — compared to our total of four occurrences — the phrase “fine tuning” (and cognates) appear five times in Senor’s, 15 times in Moser’s, 29 times in Oppy’s and 47 times in Salamon’s. Per page, these four responses give an overall frequency more than 12 times our own, strongly suggesting that more is being read into our nod towards this argument than we intended. Accordingly, Salamon states that our conception of second-order religion is “supposed to be ... supported *solely* by the Fine-Tuning Argument for the existence of God” (199, his emphasis). Abram likewise says that such belief “would rely on the Fine-Tuning Argument alone” (239). Senor says of us: “The ground of such belief, they aver, is the fine-tuning argument” (214). Oppy is initially more guarded (259–60), but later describes us as proposing “a second-order religion that is strongly supported by fine-tuning considerations” (264).

What we actually said, however, was that second-order religion “can be given some distinctive (albeit controversial) intellectual support through the increasingly popular Fine Tuning Argument” (1); that “Second-order theism is ... likely to be particularly attractive to adherents of the Fine-Tuning Ar-

9 This expectation reflects the view — based on psychological evidence and the study of world religions — of my co-author, Branden Thornhill-Miller, who plans to elaborate on second-order religion and its implications in a future paper.

10 Late in my teens, largely under the influence of an inspirational vicar, I contemplated a career in the Church. Suppose this had come to pass, and that religious doubts had only occurred to me when I was settled as a priest, part of a community and with a family to support, feeling highly fulfilled by helping others through my pastoral work and with no other career in sight. In that case, I could easily have been strongly attracted towards religious viewpoints which — as an academic philosopher — I have the luxury of viewing as insufficiently intellectually rigorous.

gument" (3); and that "the assessment of the argument is disputed, but we doubt that it is decisively refutable given the current state of knowledge, as long as its conclusion is suitably restricted" (47). This is at best faint praise for the argument, and certainly gives no suggestion that it is the *only* thing that second-order religion has going for it.

As already stated, I personally do not find the Fine Tuning Argument persuasive, but I am convinced that it is significantly better than most atheist philosophers seem to think (as long as its conclusion is, indeed, suitably restricted). Oppy is probably expressing a standard view when he says — having apparently agreed with us that Ontological, Cosmological, and Moral Arguments are "decisively refutable" — that "there is no reason to suppose that extant fine-tuning arguments are in better standing than other kinds of theistic arguments (265).¹¹ Moser is less explicit, but refers to a well-known paper that expresses "various serious objections" to the argument (34).¹² In favour of the argument, we raised the possibility that "in the future — possibly a distant future — the development of physics [may] strengthen ... the argument, for example by ... corroborating the naturalistic inexplicability of the 'anthropic coincidences'" (47).

To flesh out this speculation, suppose that by 1,000 years' time, physics has long since consolidated and removed all the irritating conflicts and lacunae that currently bedevil it. For at least 500 of those years, there has been no hint of contradiction between the successors of quantum mechanics and general relativity, while the material and forces in the universe have also ap-

11 The phrase "decisively refutable" is our own (47). Oppy himself says that the Ontological, Cosmological, and Moral Arguments are "unsuccessful", and adds that he takes this to be true also "for all the other classes of extant theistic arguments" (265).

12 These "serious" objections are mainly based on considerations of mathematical probability that bear little relation to the physics, and seem to me implausible. There are, of course, obvious difficulties in applying probability rigorously to the unique case of the creation of the universe, but in the sort of scenario I sketch below, such absolute theoretical rejection would I believe seem unconvincing. Any objection purporting to show that an inference to divine action would be unjustified *no matter how extreme the phenomena may be* has to be viewed with extreme suspicion (and in general, the most effective way of opposing Design Arguments is not to rule them out on principle, but rather, to acknowledge that they could have force if the empirical evidence were sufficiently impressive, but to point out that it isn't). To be fair to the paper in question, these issues are recognised towards the end (Colyvan *et al.* 2005, 332).

parently become well understood.¹³ The formation of the universe is also well understood in terms of the relevant laws, starting from a “Big Bang” with specific initial conditions, and developing through time towards our recognisable future with corroborative evidence at every main stage. Physical explanation, however, is still incomplete: many “anthropic coincidences” remain, with apparently arbitrary constants — all of which have resisted deeper attempts at explanation — fitting together in ways that seem precisely adjusted to enable the evolution of a complex universe with galaxies, stars, planets, and chemistry capable of supporting life (through mechanisms that are again by now well understood). Strikingly, no such “coincidence” becomes apparent within these theories until billions of years have elapsed after the Big Bang: what stands out as remarkable is not the early part of this journey, but the long-term end result of the interaction of all these laws. Way back in the 21st century, various theories were proposed to explain this apparent fine tuning as a selection effect, by speculating about evolving sequences of universes or an infinite “world ensemble”, but these have all long since proved untenable.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the development of computation has proceeded apace, with quantum computers — hugely improved since their initial mass-production more than 950 years earlier — now able to simulate alternative physical theories with unparalleled speed and accuracy. Again and again these simulations give the same message: across a huge range of such theories, with the relevant

13 This is emphatically not the current situation. The existence of “dark matter” was corroborated only in 1980, and the first direct evidence for “dark energy” came only in 1998. We still don’t have much clue what either of these are (assuming they genuinely exist), but analysis of seven years of data from NASA’s Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe, released in January 2010, suggests that 72.8% of the mass of the universe is constituted by dark energy, and 22.7% by dark matter. That leaves only 4.56% of atomic matter, the stuff that we knew to exist prior to 1980. The very recent development, uncertainty, and even internal contradictions of current physics give excellent reason for *scepticism* about “fine tuning”, but not for dogmatic *rejection* of the idea.

14 Some may argue that such proof is impossible, but the history of science strongly suggests that our imaginations are rather poor at predicting what may or may not become possible in the future. In his 1835 *Cours de Philosophie Positive*, ignorant of the developing science of spectroscopy, Auguste Comte notoriously asserted that we could never know the chemical composition of the stars. Bell’s Theorem gives a more contemporary example, enabling the demonstration — through statistical calculation and empirical testing — of a limitation on quantum “hidden variable” theories that would probably have seemed to most philosophers (including myself) to be impossible to establish.

constants varied in trillions of different ways, it has turned out that every such constant has to be within a very narrow proportion of the theoretically “feasible” range in order to generate anything like a complex chemical universe. The constants seem to be “fine tuned”, and all attempts to explain this fine tuning have utterly failed, over centuries of trying, and while science in other respects has been developing fruitfully.

To be clear, I do not personally consider this scenario at all likely, but see nothing inconceivable in it.¹⁵ And if this were to come about, then it seems to me that the remarkable apparent fine-tuning would give at least some evidence for a cosmic intelligent power, one able to *plan* and *foresee*, from the time of the Big Bang, how the universe was going to develop over the subsequent billions of years. The “coincidence” that seems to demand explanation only becomes apparent long after the initial state, and this is a distinctive feature of the Fine Tuning Argument that makes it especially suitable for indicating an *intelligent, forward-planning agent* (as well as one of cosmic scale). Hence it is not merely an update of the traditional Design Argument which Hume demolished, but has distinctive virtues.¹⁶ Oppy disagrees, deploying a standard objection:

On the theistic view, [the fine tuning of the initial causal state] will be a matter of God's initial disposition to create a big-bang universe ... in which the fine-tuned constants take the values that they do ... I suspect that most theists will favour the view that God's initial creative disposition is brutally contingent — God could have had quite different initial creative dispositions and there is nothing that explains why God had the creative dispositions that he did rather than [others] ... I prefer the variant of the naturalistic view on which the initial state of our universe is brutally necessary ... then the views are simply on a par with respect to the virtues of the explanations that they give of the fine-tuning of the causal order for life. (266)

15 By contrast, I cannot envisage any future scenario that would vindicate the Ontological, Cosmological, or Moral Arguments for God (though future discoveries could make consciousness another interesting field for discussion).

16 Compare the conclusion of Colyvan et al. (2005): “In each epoch, what it is about the cosmos that is supposed to warrant the design hypothesis has been different: the mechanistic solar system, biological organs, and now: fine tuning. But the fundamental flaws in the design argument really have nothing to do with the particular suspect chosen. ... the fine-tuning version of the argument is no better than its predecessors” (334).

This, however, seems to miss the point, because the theist who favours the Fine Tuning Argument — while perhaps agreeing that “God could have had quite different initial creative dispositions” — will not agree that “there is nothing that explains why God had the creative dispositions that he did rather than others”. Even if, in some sense, we take as “brute facts” that God is omnipotent,¹⁷ omniscient, and values loving relationships with sentient creatures, it is not then a *further* brute fact — given this overall orientation — that he chose to create a universe whose specific physical constants were precisely “tuned” in such a way as to facilitate the evolution of such creatures. Hence I conclude that the Fine Tuning Argument has more explanatory virtue than Oppy suggests, and remains in play as a potential (albeit highly debatable) support for second-order theism.

4. SALAMON'S AGATHEISM

Salamon's “agatheism” provides a fascinating counterpoint to our second-order religion, focusing on morality as the core notion rather than cosmic purpose, but otherwise playing a somewhat similar role. Certainly his vision of religions coming together through recognition of a fundamental and enlightened moral core is an attractive one, but serious questions arise about its supposed basis and viability. There is no space here for the extensive discussion that Salamon's deep and interesting paper deserves, so I shall confine myself to a few brief points, sketching my position fairly forthrightly rather than arguing for it with any subtlety.

To begin with, I share Oppy's scepticism (260–2) that first-order religions are, in general, founded on an agatheistic moral view, and am more inclined towards Łukasiewicz's view “that ‘true’ first-order religions are grounded mainly in religious authority and in the past” (229). First-order religion is largely a confused mess that exhibits far too much respect for ancient and less enlightened times, and consequently preserves a legacy which has often been strongly conditioned by superstitious stories, historical contingency, and vi-

¹⁷ Although it points to cosmic power, the Fine Tuning Argument does not strictly support *omnipotence*. Indeed in general, fine tuning is better evidence for an *architect* who is having to achieve some task within tight constraints, rather than a creator *ex nihilo* who could bring about exactly what he wants without any causal limitations.

cious battles (either over doctrine, or more obviously for naked power). Examples of all this are legion, and familiar.

When religion frames so many people's view of "life, the universe, and everything", it is bound to be closely associated with morality; moreover some varieties of religion (and specific religious texts such as *Matthew* 5–7) indeed exhibit great moral enlightenment. But this has not apparently been the main driving force of most historical religion, as evidenced by what happens when the superstitious stories, theological orthodoxies, and power struggles come into opposition with ethical values. Then we end up, for example, with Biblical texts in which the first four of the ten commandments all focus on devotion to Yahweh;¹⁸ and in which the ultimate crime — punishable through future generations — is "the sin of Jeroboam the son of Nebat", namely setting up idols of golden calves in Bethel and Dan (thus depriving Jerusalem of income from religious tribute). By contrast, the genocide of six entire nations, simply because they inhabit the Promised Land, is not only permitted but positively encouraged (and we should not be surprised to discover that *Deuteronomy* 20:14–17 has inspired so-called "Islamic State" in some of their atrocities).

If religion were genuinely founded on a moral core, then one would expect this to be the dominant factor in religious debate and discussion, but history tells a very different story. The Reformation was primarily about religious authority, and in its wake both Catholics and Protestants apparently considered it entirely in order — for example in the Thirty Years' War and the English Civil War — to kill each other with enthusiasm.¹⁹ A similar pattern is seen still in Islam, where the ancient conflict between Shia and Sunni (again fundamentally about authority) shows no sign of abating, while appeals to morally enlightened passages within the *Quran* seem largely to fall on deaf ears. So far from religion being shaped around moral considerations, brute historical fact suggests that there is a lot to be said for Hume's view that re-

18 The four are: "You shall have no other gods before me"; "You shall not make for yourself an idol ... for I ... am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation"; "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God"; "Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy ... a sabbath to the Lord your God" (*Deuteronomy* 5: 6–21).

19 Moreover the Thirty Years' War gives a very clear example in which it was religious affiliation that initially triggered the conflict and determined the sides; there is no question of a basis in some broader social concern that was independent of religion.

ligion *corrupts* morality, recommending spurious “virtues”, promoting intolerance, and encouraging the vices of hypocrisy, self-deception, and simple-minded credulity.²⁰ Contemporary societies that are politically dominated by clergy or religious orthodoxies tell a sorry tale, in line with his pessimistic comment that “If the religious spirit be ever mentioned in any historical narration, we are sure to meet afterwards with a detail of the miseries which attend it.” (*Dialogues* 12.11).

Abram “aims to expand Salamon’s agatheistic position and divert Thornhill-Miller’s and Millican’s attention to the sphere of morality” (240). Having acknowledged the sceptical view of Bernard Williams,²¹ much of the focus of her response is to emphasise the power of religion to sustain “conclusive”, “unconditional”, “inescapable” commitment “that requires our compliance” (244) and enables us to “become passionate about morality” (247). She apparently agrees with Rowan Williams that “to do something [morally] extraordinary ..., one has to subscribe to the idea of a transcendent source of value” (245). I am not persuaded by this last claim, since there are plenty of examples of heroic atheists, and of people who have devoted their lives to values without any suggestion of a “transcendent source”. But suppose it were true that the absolute heights of heroism empirically went along with religious belief — what would follow? Personally, I would rather live in a world without such heroes: where *nobody* believes that they have “inescapable” commitments derived from a transcendent source that unconditionally requires their compliance (e.g. to become terrorist martyrs). The history of those who are “passionate” about their religiously-inspired moral beliefs is depressing rather than uplifting, with religion often serving to harden their hearts against more homely secular virtues such as benevolence, empathy, and pity. Voltaire had good reason to stress how unnatural religious views can lead to unnatural acts of violence and injustice:

In days gone by, there were people who said to us: ‘You believe in incomprehensible, contradictory and impossible things because we have commanded you to; now then, commit unjust acts because we likewise order you to do so.’ ... Certainly any one who has the power to make you believe absurdities

20 For more discussion and references, see Millican (2002), 34–40 and especially 38.

21 She quotes him (242) as remarking that appeal to God in morality “either adds nothing at all, or it adds the wrong sort of thing” — a sentiment with which Hume would obviously concur.

has the power to make you commit injustices. If you do not use the intelligence with which God endowed your mind to resist believing impossibilities, you will not be able to use the sense of injustice which God planted in your heart to resist a command to do evil. Once a single faculty of your soul has been tyrannized, all the other faculties will submit to the same fate. This has been the cause of all the religious crimes that have flooded the earth. (Voltaire 1765, 277–8)

Ridiculous beliefs — for example that forcible religious conversion under torture can save a soul from eternal damnation, or that martyrdom can gain eternal bliss in the company of 72 willing virgins — can very easily lead to unspeakable acts, as history amply confirms. Morality is far safer if kept beyond the grasp of “passionate” religious enthusiasm.

Another serious difficulty for agatheism is the familiar Problem of Evil, which threatens to drive a wedge between metaphysics and morals. This is too big a topic to embark on here, so I shall simply observe that agatheism looks far harder to square with the empirical data than is our second-order religion with its ultimate creator (or perhaps fine-tuner) who generally lets the world alone. The latter might not offer as much personal support and consolation as the view that the world is governed by moral perfection, but for those who do find it existentially adequate, it is probably much easier to maintain against the hard and depressing evidence of experience.

5. SUPERNATURALISM

Turning now to the more sceptical elements of our paper, Taliaferro and Porot take us to task for using the term “supernatural” to characterise our target, for three reasons. First, they believe the term “suggests ... a clear understanding of what is natural” (215). In my idiolect, however, it suggests no such thing, and I agree entirely with the points they make about our contemporary “lack of a clear understanding of what is material” (216), and how far modern physics has moved from early-modern paradigms. Secondly, they take the term to imply *distortion* or *lack* compared with the natural (217). Again, I do not understand it as having such pejorative overtones, and “*supernatural*” sounds to me like an attribution of something *more* than natural, rather than some-

thing less (a view strongly confirmed by the Oxford English Dictionary).²² Thirdly, they dislike “the way in which ‘supernatural’ as ... currently defined in English, includes not just God ... [but] ghosts, spooks, vampires, telepathy, astro-projection, witches, Delphic oracles, dead ancestral spirits, poltergeists, and so on” (217). This requires more discussion.

In the first sentence of our Introduction, we characterised our topic as “belief in supernatural agents such as gods, angels, and spirits”; we then spoke of “such invisible powers” and “instances of perceived supernatural agency”. Given this focus, two reasonable alternatives to the word “supernatural” would be Hume’s term, “invisible, intelligent powers”, or — perhaps preferably for Taliaferro and Porot — “incorporeal agents”. Now I take it that incorporeal agency can reasonably be considered as “supernatural” in the sense of being in radical tension with our scientific understanding of the natural world. The limits of physical matter admittedly remain very unclear, potentially embracing “psychic” qualities (with panpsychism now taken seriously by a fair number of philosophers); this indeed makes terms such as “physicalism” and “naturalism” hard to pin down. But as far as I know there has been no serious *scientific* evidence of *agents that are entirely incorporeal*; and the belief that such agents exist remains clearly in the religious (and perhaps parapsychological) rather than scientific domain, completely dissociated from our developing understanding of biology, evolution, and the mechanisms of human thought and action. This is not, of course, to presume that it is false or universally rejected by scientists; but in general parlance incorporeal agents would count as “supernatural” if anything does.²³ Talk of incorporeal agents will also embrace some of the occult entities whose company Taliaferro and Porot resent (though by no means all of them: vampires and telepathy, for example, need involve no such agency). I can understand why they dislike belief in God being put alongside belief in dead ancestral spirits and so forth, but those do all happen to be instances of the topic under discussion. And it is

22 The non-obsolete OED definitions of the adjective are “1(a) Belonging to a realm or system that *transcends nature*, as that of *divine*, magical, or ghostly *beings* ...”; “1(b) Relating to, dealing with, or characterized by such a realm, system, or force”; and “2. *More than what is natural or ordinary; unnaturally or extraordinarily great*; abnormal, extraordinary.” (my emphasis).

23 As the OED clearly confirms. And again, most would consider the power to act without a body a *superpower* rather than a limitation.

indeed an implication of our view that some of the processes that lead to belief in divine action lead also to belief in ancestral spirits and witchcraft that most would regard as “superstitious”. I acknowledge that “there is a tendency to associate what is supernatural with that which is superstitious” (218), but on our view, such an association is not entirely inappropriate: if the same psychological processes are, indeed, involved in both, then that is highly relevant to their assessment. Overall, therefore, I am unconvinced by any objection of principle to the term “supernatural”, and from a stylistic point of view, “supernatural belief” seems clearly preferable to “belief in incorporeal agency”. I also note that our other critics raised no objection to the term, and indeed used it themselves. But just to be very clear, our use of the term “supernatural” is not in any way intended to function as a *persuasive definition*: the issues we raise are to be decided by discussion and argument, not by verbally enshrined prejudices.

6. HUME ON MIRACLES

I hold no brief to defend Hume against the charge of racism, though Taliaferro and Porot overstate it unfairly.²⁴ And I am prepared to accept that his apparent unwillingness here to accept phenomena beyond his experience may suggest parallels with his view on miracles.²⁵ Moreover I agree with Taliaferro and Porot that Hume’s confusing discussion of “his case of world-wide total darkness” (221), and his failure to link the issue of miracles more clearly with the idea of divine *teleology* (222), are serious weaknesses.²⁶ But I take issue with Taliaferro and Porot’s discussion of contrary miracles. They are in

24 They say, for example, that Hume “grants [Williams] no more skills than a parrot” (220), which would of course be both ridiculous and extremely offensive. Hume actually says that Williams is “likely ... admired for very slender accomplishments”, in much the same way as a parrot can be admired for “speak[ing] a few words plainly”. What count as “very slender accomplishments” for humans and parrots are clearly quite different, and Hume expresses no doubt that Williams has some “parts and learning” by comparison with other Jamaicans.

25 Just as Taliaferro and Porot should acknowledge the equally obvious parallels between religious and “superstitious” beliefs involving incorporeal agents. Note that if, as they claim, “Hume seems just as ready to dismiss reports of intelligent blacks as to dismiss miracle stories due to an errant imagination or ... cognitive biases” (220), then this makes his undervaluing of the evidence for black people’s accomplishments more a cognitive than a moral failing.

26 Both points are made very explicitly in Millican (2011), §18 (182–4) — this paper is referred to several times in *CCDD* (see footnotes 11, 13, 14, and 15).

danger of misrepresenting us when they refer to “TMM’s revision of Hume’s critique of miracles” and then go on to state a view, supposedly “As [TMM] phrased it” (223), which looks very like the Humean position *that we were explicitly criticising* (on 15–16). We ourselves said:

Hume goes much too far when arguing that miracles ‘pretended to have been wrought’ in contrary religions are ‘to be regarded as contrary facts.’ ... Indeed, as we have seen, M_1 and M_2 need not be ‘contrary’ even in the weak sense of merely making each other *less probable*, despite the strict contrariety of their associated religions, R_1 and R_2 . (16)

Against this background, it seems strange that Taliaferro and Porot should argue so forcefully towards the conclusion: “To say that incoherence between doctrines establishes that the miracle did not happen, even when all ... faiths could (in principle) agree that it did, is misguided.” (224). We agree, and we never said — or even suggested — any such thing.

A more substantial disagreement emerges when Taliaferro and Porot address the issue of whether believers can “rationally reject the miracles of other faiths without rejecting the miracles of their own faith” (226), but here I believe they have overlooked the force of our argument. Their concern seems to be to establish the potential for *asymmetries* between different religions based on the content of the relevant beliefs (e.g. moral egalitarianism versus hierarchy), and they point out correctly that “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” (225). This, of course, is *exactly* the sort of reasoning that Hume was proposing regarding “contrary miracles”: rejecting miracle stories on the basis that the corresponding religion is presumed to be false. And so ironically Taliaferro and Porot are now apparently lining up on Hume’s side, in favour of a kind of reasoning on which we were casting doubt (though on the basis of probabilistic considerations rather than alleged incoherence).

In our discussion of “contrary miracles”, we were not denying that a believer might justifiably draw distinctions between miracle stories in different religions, and indeed the question of *justification* here is irrelevant. Taliaferro and Porot (225) quote us as saying:

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. (CCDD, 19)

Our denial of logical compulsion here was made *against Hume*, as the parenthesis makes very clear. And our point was that, notwithstanding this lack of compulsion, most believers would *in fact* deny the miracle stories of other religions. *Whether or not this denial would be justified*, such religious believers would then be faced with a host of miraculous reports from a multitude of religions, *the vast majority of which they consider to be false*. This would immediately imply that miracle reports are statistically very unreliable. It would also raise the question of how these false reports came about, with a very plausible explanation being that “humans are naturally drawn towards belief in the supernatural, with a vivid imagination driven by hopes and fears, cognitive biases, lack of critical judgement, and a delight in miracle stories etc.” (17). Both the obvious statistical message, and the naturalistic explanation, cast serious doubt not only on the miracle stories of *other* religions, but also on those of the believer’s religion itself. And thus we reach a clear instance of the Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma: “That in so far as ... miracle reports ... point towards specific aspects of particular religions, their diversity and mutual opposition undermines their evidential force; while in so far as [they] involve a ‘common core’ of similarity, they point towards a proximate common cause ... that is natural rather than supernatural.” (3, 20).

7. RATIONALITY AND OBJECTIVITY

Our discussion raised big questions about rationality and objectivity, and many interesting points have been made in response. As Moser (33–5), Oppy (268), and Senor (216–20) observe, what it is rational to believe will inevitably depend to some extent on the epistemological situation of the individual believer, and hence we were being imprecise in talking with such apparent generality of the “rational limits of supernatural belief” (2). More substantially, it is debatable how far general third-person (e.g. statistical) considerations should be taken into account by the rational subject who has a first-person experience as of a supernatural agent, or who receives religious testimony from someone he trusts. Taliaferro and Porot suggest that objective testing — for example of the efficacy of petitionary prayer — is especially

problematic when God's existence is in question, given his supposed necessity and omnipresence (226–7).²⁷ They also provide an amusing story of a religious experience striking Thornhill-Miller and me whilst walking back to Hertford College after giving a paper elsewhere (232–3).²⁸ Senor (217) suggests that we are inappropriately assuming “a general parity among the practitioners of various religions regarding the experiences they have and the beliefs they form on the basis of them”,²⁹ and argues that testimony can be “a rationality conferring process”, even if it cannot ultimately be traced back to genuine religious experiences (219–20).³⁰ Moser points out that diversity does not necessarily imply disagreement, speculating that “God could issue opposing commands to you and me for keeping the Sabbath”, giving us both “undefeated evidence”, bearing in mind that “God could have different spe-

27 I suspect, however, that their points about prayer are self-defeating, since if “There is no one on earth who is not prayed for” (226) — and if this lack of a control group undermines any attempt to test prayer's efficacy — then it seems to follow that individual prayer (in the context of universal collective prayers) has no curative value. They cannot have it both ways: either *individual* prayer is ineffective, or it has specific good effects that could be detectable.

28 The story somewhat chimes with me, since I have sung the *Magnificat* many times in the past, and have probably got closest through music — including Church music — to what I might be tempted to call a religious experience. But the example has an easy answer: “once ... supernatural agents (whose veracity cannot be guaranteed) are brought into the picture, it becomes obvious that mere humans will be unable to tell with any reliability what source any miracle has” (*CCDD*, 17 n. 27). The Problem of Evil would strongly dissuade me from accepting *any* religious experience as involving genuine contact with an omnipotent God, because even supernatural beings are to be judged morally by how they act, not by how they choose to present themselves to potentially gullible observers.

29 He also suggests that we offer no relevant empirical evidence for this, apparently overlooking the wealth of psychological studies cited in our paper that point towards such commonality.

30 There is, however, a serious problem here. Suppose we accept, with Senor, that “a testifier might not be rational in her belief, but sincerely assert that P and a hearer might thereby come to rationally believe that P. So, even if TMM's argument might cause problems for the rationality of specific religions in a general, person-neutral sense, many believers might be rational in their beliefs.” (220). This seems to be presented as a vindication of the potential rationality of religious belief. But any victory here is obviously Pyrrhic, for its premise is that rational belief can be founded on irrational testimony. On that basis, almost any belief that is not *obviously* false can in principle be rationally held, if based on a confident report from someone who is fully trusted but in fact utterly deluded on the matter in question. I therefore think we were wise to focus, in *CCDD*, on the “rational limits of supernatural belief” from a well-informed and intersubjective point of view, rather than that of the individual believer.

cific purposes for you and me” (33). Oppy (268–9) and Senor (220) point to epistemological externalism as potentially playing a role in these discussions.

Other significant points concern an implicit contrast that we may have seemed to assume between religious diversity and an imagined naturalistic unanimity. Taliaferro and Porot indeed allege unfairness here, noting the considerable diversity between “different naturalistic accounts of human persons” and of “the human mind” (223–4). Such diversity “also concerns deep matters in metaphysics, epistemology, value theory, philosophy of language, and other sub-fields” (228). In the same vein, Oppy says:

Some, but not all, intelligent, reflective, interested, well-informed philosophers have been, and some, but not all, intelligent, reflective, interested and well-informed philosophers are, determinists, substance dualists, consequentialists, communitarians, virtue ethicists, logical pluralists, phenomenologists, existentialists, physicalists, legal positivists, and so forth. What credence, then, can we give to claims that it is *irrational* to believe in determinism, or consequentialism, or communitarianism ... etc.? (269–70)

He also goes on to stress that the “human cognitive failings — egocentric bias, confirmation bias, optimistic bias, and the like” that we highlight as an epistemological problem with regard to religion “are universal ... So a question naturally arises about the extent to which the views of Thornhill-Miller and Millican on the question of the rationality of naturalistic and theistic beliefs are themselves affected by these universal cognitive failings.” (270).

All these are interesting questions, deserving of far longer and more detailed answers than I am able to give here.³¹ But in brief, I continue to think that there are special problems with the diversity in religious belief, which fully justify the place that we gave it in our paper, and which strongly cohere with our emphasis on the Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma. First, the extent of religious diversity is longstanding, widespread and notorious, characterised by uncompromising and violent disagreement throughout recorded history, and relatively little rational engagement. Secondly, and relatedly, the

31 Other very interesting issues are raised by Heim (249–50) in relation to our discussion of the “Normal/Objective Dilemma”, and I regret that lack of space precludes addressing those here. One point worth noting, however, is Heim’s approving mention of Damasio’s view “that emotion is an integral element in the way ‘higher’ human reason works” (249). As I have noted elsewhere (Millican 2002, 425), Damasio’s book in turn approvingly mentions Hume, who in this respect yet again achieved insights that were well ahead of his time.

existential concerns that motivate religion typically give the relevant beliefs an intensity out of all proportion to the evidence, making believers peculiarly weak at assessing that evidence objectively, and giving religious institutions a concern for orthodoxy which often crushes even further any prospect of calm, objective reflection. Thirdly, for these and associated reasons, religious diversity is deeply entrenched, with rival communities only rarely attempting to learn from each other or modify their views: religious affiliation for most people is therefore overwhelmingly determined by geography or family community, rather than by rational investigation or discussion. Fourthly, in so far as religion is based on personal experience rather than local tradition or teaching, it is clear that such experiences are culturally conditioned, with the common underlying features typically interpreted by the believer as having doctrinal implications that almost invariably mirror the relevant community. Fifthly — as we documented at length — psychological studies clearly suggest that several mechanisms that lie behind supernatural religious beliefs also commonly lead to superstitious beliefs which defy any rational credibility.

Senor suggests that a religious belief could be justified on externalist grounds if “it is the product of a properly functioning, reliable, truth-aimed belief-forming process operating in an appropriate environment” (220). There are at least two problems with this. First, externalist accounts of justification are essentially *third-person*, based on an outside view of the processes involved rather than the believer’s own perspective. These often fit well with our everyday ascriptions of knowledge (including to animals and unreflective people), but they are far less helpful when we ourselves are plagued with epistemological doubts. In these circumstances, it is of little help to know that *if* our belief that *P* is the product of a reliable process operating in a standard way, *then* it counts as knowledge: our worry is precisely that it might not be the product of such a process, and hence would not count as knowledge. Thus externalism does not alleviate our epistemological concern, but instead re-packages it at a higher level: uncertainty over *whether P is true* gets replaced by uncertainty over *whether I know that P*. When we seek *reflective* knowledge from the first-person point of view, mere externalist considerations are not sufficient.

The second problem with relying on externalism here is that the relevant belief-forming processes — if individuated in the obvious way — simply are

not reliable in general, as the sheer statistics of disagreement indicate clearly.³² In response, it seems to me to be a desperate expedient to suggest, as Moser does, that there “could be a divine purpose for diversity and disagreement in religions, and thus the latter need not count against evidence for theistic belief or first-order theistic religion” (39). Suppose, if you will, that God has excellent reason (unknown to us) for dividing mankind into ten groups, who all receive different and mutually incompatible revelations about the divine nature or the destiny of the universe. Even if God is blameless here (for he knows best), this obviously undermines his record as a reliable source of truth, when at least 90% of us are told something false.³³

The points above suggest some obvious answers to the “partners in crime” objection which alleges that the situation in naturalistic philosophy is no better than in first-order religion. If it was in fact the case that disagreements in epistemology, ethics, or metaphysics persisted, over generations and between communities, in the same way as differences in religion, and when they were raised, tended to precipitate dogmatic assertion (or special pleading in favour of supposedly privileged personal revelations) rather than rational discussion (in which the claimed evidence is exposed to critical scrutiny), then I would agree wholeheartedly that this gave good reason to withhold confidence from

32 This does not take for granted that the mere existence of proximate natural causal mechanisms undermines religious beliefs, as Senor (218) and Taliaferro & Porot (230–2) may be presuming. I agree that it would be possible — perhaps even to be expected — for God to exploit such mechanisms if he wished to generate religious experiences. But the problem is that these mechanisms operate in many cases where the resulting beliefs are clearly unreasonable, thus demonstrating their unreliability. A superficially tempting response might be to reconceptualise the mechanisms in such a way that genuine divine initiation becomes treated as *definitive* of them, thus making the relevant type of mechanism an *infallible* indicator of God’s presence (i.e. if God did not initiate the process, then it should not be counted as an instance of truthful mechanism *T*). But then we get back to the problem of being unable to tell, *from the first-person point of view of the believer*, whether such a divine knowledge-generating mechanism is indeed operative, or whether instead it is the (indistinguishable, and apparently far more common) delusive variant *F*, with no deity playing any part in the process.

33 Floating this possibility — of some unknown divine purpose in fostering disagreement — also seems to be in tension with an earlier remark, in which Moser criticised us for appealing to a “mere ‘possibility’” on the basis that “a mere possibility does not yield actual evidence” (34). As regards that particular case, we should have made clear that the Fine Tuning Argument, if *accepted*, would suggest the consequences we described, having explicitly made the point that they were “only to be expected” if “the universe has in fact been finely tuned” (4).

the relevant beliefs.³⁴ Likewise, if it turned out that particular commonplace experiences — for example of intentional action — were standardly interpreted quite differently by members of different philosophical clans, even when all the objective data pointed to commonality, then I would refrain from giving these interpretations any significant evidential weight in respect of the crucial disagreements. When matters are genuinely controversial, and objective evidence is hard to identify, the withholding of assent is not to be regretted: appropriate scepticism can readily be embraced! Oppy's list of debatable philosophical doctrines includes many plausible examples of such cases, mostly taken from ethics (e.g. consequentialism, communitarianism, virtue ethics, existentialism) and from a range of notoriously difficult areas where our attempts to understand the objective and subjective worlds come into tension (e.g. determinism, substance dualism, phenomenology, physicalism). In the former group, it is unclear that there even exists any objective method of resolution (since ethical judgements plausibly require emotional engagement), and many would question whether seeking literal *truth* (as opposed, say, to culturally sensitive reflective equilibrium) is appropriate. In the latter group, not only are the issues complex and interlocking, with questions of debatable definition as well as disputed evidence, but also, it often seems likely here that our theorising is running well ahead of any solid scientific basis. And in all of these areas, our philosophical “intuitions” are so contaminated with ancient and modern baggage (much of it associated with religion), that it should be no surprise that agreement is hard to reach.³⁵

34 Scepticism should also be extended, of course, to “the views of Thornhill-Miller and Millikan”, if careful analysis yields significant evidence that our arguments are fallacious, perhaps owing to the various “universal cognitive failings” that we highlight as promoting supernatural beliefs (cf. Oppy 270). The great virtue of debates such as this is precisely to enable the exposure of any fallacies, and to facilitate cleansing of the contending arguments from dependence on unnoticed biases or question-begging etc. No procedure can *guarantee* achievement of a rational outcome in such contentious and difficult matters, but calm, open, reasoned debate radically improves the odds.

35 For example, traditional religious beliefs generally go together with an embrace of dualism and a rejection of consequentialism and determinism (since the Free Will Defence depends on a libertarian account of freedom), as confirmed by the survey results at https://philpapers.org/surveys/linear_most_with.pl?A=main%3AGod%3Atheism.

In other areas of philosophy, less marked by tribal “schools”, there is substantial progress, and it is achieved largely through dialogue and reasoned debate. Most of us agree most of the time, for example, when an argument is valid or invalid, when various theories are mutually consistent or inconsistent, and what constitutes a strong point for, or against, some theory. Our views on these things are not determined by our upbringing, and we learn them at least largely through the development of understanding rather than authoritative instruction. A more distinctive but perhaps equally important point is that philosophy itself is a very unusual discipline, with a strong tradition of exploring questions at the frontiers of discovery and understanding. Hence it has often been historically the midwife of other disciplines, for example physics and political theory in the 17th century (e.g. Galileo, Descartes, Hobbes, Locke), and of economics and psychology in the 18th century (e.g. Hume, Smith, Hartley). Once such new fields have matured sufficiently to have their own established methods of investigation, they typically pass on to more specialist thinkers, and cease to count as “philosophy”. Thus the questions that today count as “philosophical” are typically those that are either enduringly difficult and controversial (including questions of value), or those that currently lie at the frontiers of investigation (e.g. in the borderlands of cognitive science and artificial intelligence).

Philosophy therefore embraces a high proportion of controversial questions where methods are uncertain, doubt is appropriate and dogmatism is not to be trusted. The same of course goes for first-order religion, but here there is no such creditable track record of fruitful novelty, rigorous debate, and theoretical development down through the ages. Whereas secular philosophy—both natural and social—has delivered impressive change in the scientific, political, and ethical arenas over the last 400 years or so, it is only relatively recently that the main established religions have even started to move away from implausible literalist beliefs (e.g. creation and worldwide flood stories) that remained unquestioned for many times longer, even in the teeth of discoveries that should have cast serious doubt on them. In the moral sphere, they likewise continue to drag their feet, slow as always to reconsider the prejudices that in the past were used to justify slavery, and more recently to reject contraception, homosexuality, assisted death, and much else (not to mention specifically religious “crimes” such as apostasy and heresy).

I conclude that the “partners in crime” defence of first-order religion cannot work. But even if it were to succeed in putting philosophy in the same boat, the appropriate response would be to extend our scepticism to philosophy, not to withdraw it from first-order religion.

In short, therefore, and despite the challenges posed by the very interesting responses discussed here (all too briefly), I believe that the Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma remains a significant sceptical challenge to first-order religion.

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