

# The Relativistic Bog

## *Two Sources of the Knowledge of God*

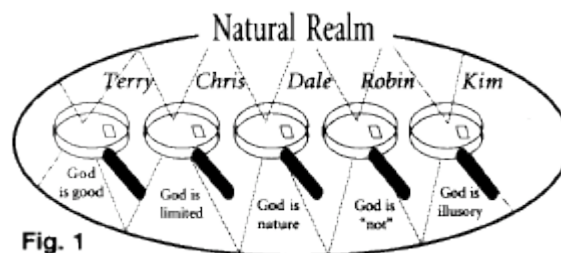
Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, wrote, "Philosophy begins with a sense of wonder, " and concluded that the human mind cannot be satisfied until it has risen to the knowledge of the highest things. The mathematician Blaise Pascal claimed: "there is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every human being." The French existentialist Albert Camus wrote, "There is only one really serious philosophical problem, that of suicide. To judge that life is or is not worth the trouble of being lived, this is to reply to the fundamental question of philosophy."1 Although Pascal, Aristotle and Camus represent very different points of view, their remarks point to the same basic human characteristic: we seek more than the assurance of food, drink, and warmth to make us happy.

Instead, we want answers to questions about the meaning of life. When we ask "Who am I?", "What is my purpose?", "Is there a God?", and "If so, what is God like?" or "What does God have to do with me or my purpose?" we tip our hand: each of us is on a quest to make sense out of the fragmentary pieces of our existence.

When we go about the task of making sense out of life, we unconsciously rely on a set of beliefs that we already hold. These beliefs act as a sorting mechanism, or filter. They help us figure out which experiences are more meaningful, important, or relevant than others. These beliefs, even if we are not consciously aware of them, are among the most important things about us. They determine which questions we will ask, and which answers to these question we will consider. In this short essay, I will suggest a method for building and testing an adequate belief system.

### **Everyone has an opinion...**

The intellectual structure that we use to interpret the world is called a "worldview". On one level it can be argued that there are as many worldviews as there are individuals. Yet, we can identify some basic classes of worldviews. For example, the problem of the existence of God can be approached in at least five different ways, each way leading to a different solution. Let's catalog them briefly, according to the different conclusions they reach.



Terry (classical theism): "Good things like the order and beauty of nature or our capacity for love and hope suggest an Ultimate Source of goodness. This maximally good being we call God, who is perfect in intelligence, power, and goodness."

Chris (finite or "process" theism): "The endless history of war, famine, suffering and death suggests that if a divine being exists at all, this deity is necessarily imperfect, or limited, in intelligence, power, or concern for humankind."

Dale (monism): "God cannot be categorized as either good or evil because God subsumes everything, including what we think is good and evil, in the divine Oneness of Being. God is everything and everything is God."

Robin (naturalism): "Nature needs no explanation: it is simply all there is, or ever could be. God is a superfluous hypothesis, an unnecessary extra, for supposedly explaining the cosmos. The material universe has no more fundamental cause than the interplay of matter, energy, time, and chance."

Kim (subjective idealism): "The external world is merely an illusion. The most that I have access to is the interior of my mind. Because of this subject-object uncertainty, questions regarding 'ultimate beings somewhere out there' become irrelevant, imaginary, or nonsensical."

How can we respond to such a variety of viewpoints? One natural response is to say that everyone is right, that each one has discovered what is "true for me". This response is called "relativism". Relativism seems safe, because we never have to say, "I think I'm right and you're wrong." However, this avoidance of disagreement comes at a high price: it muddles the question of truth.

Views as contrary as these five cannot be all true, since they contradict one another. The only way we can say that they are all true is by watering down our concept of "truth". Then it becomes something that is purely subjective make-believe.

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

If we are to escape the bog of intellectual pessimism, we must find some source of knowledge that is widely shared and on which we can base our judgments. One time-honored and widely cited source is called "inductive inference".

An inference is a step or process of reasoning. In deductive inference, we make explicit what is already contained implicitly in our current stock of information. For example, if I know that all PhDs are over-educated, and that Paul is a PhD, I can infer deductively that Paul must be over-educated. In contrast, inductive inference involves taking a step beyond what is contained in the data at hand. Through inductive inference, our mind observes patterns in human experience and uses those patterns to form reasonable conjectures about unseen or not-yet-seen aspects of the world.

However, there are two important limitations or qualifications to this use of inductive inference to establish the nature of ultimate reality. First, there is no unanimity about which inferences to draw. People like Chris, Dale, Robin and Kim above reach very different conclusions from the same evidence, and there is no universally agreed-upon method for settling these disputes. It appears that, at least in the real world, where people bear so many limitations and prejudices, the inductive method is not perfectly reliable. We need, therefore, an independent source of information about the existence and character of the ultimate reality, one that could corroborate or correct the tentative conclusions that we have based on inductive inference alone.

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

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

If we are to gain adequate answers to these existential questions about the "supernatural" realm (assuming for the moment that such a realm exists), then the supernatural must break into the natural realm and reveal the answers to us, using meaningful historical events and inspired messages. This is called "special" or "historical" revelation, in contrast to the so-called "general revelation" of ultimate reality in nature and in the structure of human consciousness. If such special revelation exists, then it has the potential of adding to what we have already discovered through inductive inference. Together, the two sources of knowledge help us to build a satisfactory worldview.

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

Revelation has a problem, though: the problem of credibility. The fact is that there are many documents and teachers that claim to reveal to us the nature of ultimate reality. How, then, are we to determine which one is the accurate revelation of God?

The question of "Which revelation?" appears to be even more puzzling than the question "Which inductive inference?" However, we are not left entirely without direction. The competing sources of divine revelation championed by major religions, including the Bible or the Koran or the Book of Mormon, have included claims regarding

- (a) the supernatural foresight of its sacred writers (i.e., prophecy),
- (b) the extraordinary life, words and deeds of its founder (i.e., miracles and wonders), and (c) the transforming influence of the religion on the lives of real people (i.e., impact).

These three criteria, then, determine what shape an investigation into the credibility of any purported revelation must take. If Christianity, or any other alleged revelation, emerges as a clear winner over its rivals on these three points, then we are on solid ground in believing that its texts offer an objective reference point that bypasses the relativistic bog and points toward the possibility of knowing God.

### **Conclusion**

We have seen that, to build a worldview, it would be helpful to use both inductive inference and historical revelation. These two methods are not mutually exclusive but complementary. We owe it to ourselves to use the best means available for gaining knowledge about God, ourselves, and our place in the universe.

However, as we use these methods we must face two facts. First, inductive inference is inherently limited as a means for discovering answers to all of our existential questions. Second, because there is more than one religion that claims divine revelation, we must find some way of weighing the credibility of each claim. It seems reasonable that a revelation worthy of contributing to our understanding of God must first demonstrate its credibility through fulfilled prophecy, credible miracles, and widespread impact.

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