

Second Response to Cavin and Columbetti

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I am grateful to Cavin and Columbetti for their continuing interest in my work. I am however unmoved by the three main arguments in their latest paper.¹ These arguments all seem to suffer from a common error, that we can investigate a theory about what happened at a particular place and time without taking into account *everything* we know relevant to the probability of theories about the origin and working of the world (general background evidence) and *everything* we know about the lives and circumstances of the people involved in the events of that place and time (prior historical evidence), as well as the effects of those events (posterior historical evidence). Despite their correct insistence that we should take into account 'the total available evidence', they seem to me to have failed badly to do this.

Their first argument boils down to the claim that my argument that 'e (the total evidence) renders h (the hypothesis that Jesus was God incarnate who rose from the dead) probable' relies on an unjustified assumption that God would not massively deceive the human race 'on a matter of vast importance'²(RGI 64). But this 'assumption' is - I claim - entailed by the general theory of the world which entails h, which is itself rendered probable by all the evidence of natural theology together with the prior and posterior historical evidence. I explicitly rely in RGI on my other writing³ for justification of my claim that the evidence of natural theology makes it at least as probable as not that there is a God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly free - from which, I argue, it follows that he is perfectly good. We understand enough about what goodness consists in to know that such a God would not practice such a massive deception. Now of course this general theory has to be compatible with all we know about history; and I argued in my previous response to Cavin and Columbetti, that the evidence makes it probable that no events which would be massive deceptions by God (if there is a God), actually occurred. For example even if e includes any evidence supporting the claim that God authenticated the Koran, the evidence that God authenticated the teaching of Jesus (by his Resurrection) is stronger and that renders those parts of the Koran incompatible with the teaching of Jesus probably false, and so the existence of the Koran would not constitute a 'massive deception' by God. For Muslims do not claim that there was associated with Mohammad an event of a kind which, if it occurred as described

would constitute an evident violation of laws of nature which – if it occurred – the Resurrection of Jesus certainly constitutes. But in the absence of evidence equally good to the evidence about the Resurrection, supporting any claims that God authenticated any teaching 'on a matter of vast importance' incompatible with h or for other reasons very probably false, my claim that God would not massively deceive, which on the evidence of natural theology is at least as probable as not and has its probability increased by the prior and posterior historical evidence which I cited, must stand .

Cavin and Columbetti object that my discussion of theories of what happened to Jesus after his crucifixion, incompatible with the traditional Christian theory, is 'cursory and incomplete' (CC5). My book *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* contains 224 pages, including 15 pages of a chapter entitled 'Rival theories of what happened'. Of course I could have written a much longer book discussing particular rival theories at far greater length. But however long a book you write, someone can always write a longer one; there could not be a maximally exhaustive discussion of any theory, let alone in this area. And the book which I did write was, I hope, valuable for discussing at some length the kind of evidence (general background and prior historical evidence) generally ignored by New Testament experts. Cavin and Columbetti do not actually produce any evidence supporting any particular rival theory which I ignored and show why it is important; they just say that 'it may well be' (CC5) that there is strong contrary evidence. But that could be said with respect to any theory about anything. As Cavin and Columbetti rightly stress, to be justifiably believed a theory must depend on the 'total available evidence'; but, as well as the word 'total', the word 'available' needs to be stressed. Anyway, in effect, I was discussing rival theories; for every theory is logically equivalent to the negation of the disjunction of all its possible incompatible rivals. All my positive arguments for, for example trusting the testimony of witnesses to the empty tomb, are arguments against all theories, actually proposed and yet to be proposed, which entail that such witnesses are untrustworthy. So -I claim- I have offered 'an adequate justification of [my] claim that we wouldn't get e unless God brought it about'.

Cavin and Columbetti's second and third arguments depend on claims that I have 'failed to include' in my evidence, 'two crucial items of negative natural theology' (CC8). The first is that (if there is a God) he appears to have an 'ontologically fundamental disposition' not 'to suspend the laws of nature responsible for post mortem decomposition' of human corpses. But God – in virtue of his 'perfect freedom' as I spelled it out elsewhere – acts only for reasons. And someone who almost always does an act of a certain type will, if under the influence of reason alone, do a different act in special

circumstances if there is a reason for doing it in just those circumstances. Kant allegedly almost always went for his daily walk along the same route, beginning at just the same time and walking at just the same pace, so that the people of Königsberg were able to set their clocks by the time at which each day Kant walked past their houses. But if Kant had learnt one day that a dear friend was dying, he would certainly have gone to visit him even if the visit disrupted his daily routine. God has good reason for almost always letting people die and stay dead, and so their corpses to decay – such as⁴ the reason that, if the time of a human on earth is limited, our normal life on earth has a certain kind of seriousness about it – because when that time has expired, humans cannot undo the earthly good or harm they have done. If I spend all my seventy or eighty years doing harm, I have no time left to undo it. It is good for humans to have serious choices, and that means choices whose consequences they cannot undo. But if there is a special reason why God should bring to life a particular human, he would act on that. If God is to reveal very important truths to humans which they could not otherwise discover (e.g. that the death of Jesus provided atonement for their sins), God needs to associate with that teaching an event which fairly clearly God alone can do and which would not have happened unless God had brought it about by doing what he would not normally do. That means an event which is a violation of the natural order. If God does that by bringing about such an event which was predicted by a prophet, God thereby puts his signature on the rest of the prophet's teaching. This was recognized in passages of the Old Testament familiar to first century Jews – see the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal, and the requirements stated in Deuteronomy for a prophet being a true prophet⁵. Jesus certainly predicted that all the dead would rise again (to be judged on the basis of their actions during their previous finite life); and his own Resurrection contrary to laws of nature would be a partial fulfilment of that prediction. Thereby God puts his signature on other parts of Jesus's teaching, for example that the death of Jesus provided atonement for the sins of humans. God acts on reason, and where he has a reason to do what he does not normally do, he will do it.

Thirdly, Cavin and Columbetti claim that I should have taken into account the 'statistically general evidence' that 'those who exhibit impeccable public behaviour have an exceptionally strong tendency to commit private or "invisible" sins', and so that is 'extremely probable that even Jesus occasionally committed private or 'invisible sins' (CC 12&13), and so was not perfectly good and so was not God. But again part of the total evidence is the evidence of natural theology which makes it as probable as not that there is a God who is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly free and so essentially perfectly good and so sinless, who has good

reason to become incarnate. And the prior historical evidence makes it very probable that the only plausible candidate for an incarnate God was Jesus, and this is backed up by the occurrence of events (the posterior historical evidence) which would be very improbable unless Jesus was God incarnate. So there is much prior evidence that Jesus was sinless. Of course if we are to hold this, it must be the case that there is no historical evidence that Jesus sinned; but as I argued and as Cavin and Columbetti seem willing - in order to make their main point -to concede, the 'detailed historical evidence.. is "such as one would expect" if [Jesus] led a perfect life'. So we don't need detailed information about Jesus's thoughts for it to be probable on our total evidence that Jesus was sinless. I conclude that the conclusion (p.203) of RGI that 'if the background evidence leaves it not too improbable that there is a God likely to act in the ways discussed, then the total evidence makes it very probable that Jesus was God Incarnate who rose from the dead' remains unscathed by Cavin and Columbetti's latest objections.

NOTES

1. R.G. Cavin and C.A. Columbetti, 'Negative Natural Theology, and the Sinlessness, Incarnation, and Resurrection of Jesus', *Philosophia Christi*. By 'CC' followed by a number, I refer to the pages of the typescript of that paper. I refer to pages of my book *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford University Press, 2003), by 'RGI' followed by a number.
2. See my previous reply to Cavin and Columbetti, 'Does God permit massive deception?' *Philosophia Christi* 15 (2013)265-270, for how 'massive deception' should be understood.
3. See my *The Existence of God*, second edition (Oxford University Press, 2004). I reach the conclusion there (p.342)that 'on our total evidence' of natural theology 'theism is more probable than not'. But in RGI I did not need to make as strong a claim as that. The weaker claim is all that is necessary for the argument of RGI.
4. In *The Existence of God*, second edition, I give five separate reasons why God would have given humans on earth only a short finite life. See pp. 228-31.
5. See 1Kings 18, and Deuteronomy 13:1-5 and 18:20-22.