

## ПОНЯТИЯ И КАТЕГОРИИ

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### **Divine Revelation: A Modest Metaphysical Account**

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Contemporary discussions about divine revelation are primarily epistemic: How can we know that a revelation is veridical? Should we conceive of a revelation as primarily propositional or non-propositional? What is the role of faith in receiving a revelation? Etc. In this paper I am addressing the metaphysical question how a revelation is possible at all. I argue that a metaphysics of powerful particulars provides a useful framework for proposing a metaphysical model of revelation in terms of God having actualized the self-revealing power by acting upon other substances. In a revelation God activates the fundamental disposition inherent in each creature to be responsive to God’s call of salvation.

**Keywords:** powerful particulars; divine powers; divine omnipresence; revelation and salvation; analytic theology

**Citation:** Gasser, G. “Divine Revelation: A Modest Metaphysical Account”, *Philosophy of Religion: Analytic Researches*, 2019, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 5–18.

### **Introduction**

The Aristotelian God is a self-sufficient God. As perfect unmoved self-mover existing outside the universe, God is not showing any profound interest in material reality. Why should such a God? As perfect being, God performs perfect actions only, which involves thinking perfect thoughts. Thinking anything less than perfect would stain God’s perfection, which is impossible given God’s perfect nature. Therefore, the only adequate and possible content of thought for the divine mind of an Aristotelian God is God himself. Consequently, the Aristotelian God happily and eternally contemplates nothing but himself.

Someone adhering to an Aristotelian God can affirm that God exists and that God is keeping the universe with its laws of nature in existence. She can also argue for ‘natural’ or ‘general’ revelation, that is, the view that a proper use of human reason will be able to discover the fundamental truths about God’s nature and mode of existence. Reflection upon general features of the world such as its contingency, order and regularity, human experiences of wonder, awe or dependence

and metaphysical speculations about the nature of perfect beings, so the argument goes, will direct human reasoning towards these fundamental truths.

However, such an Aristotelian concept of God differs profoundly from the biblical view of God deliberately and freely revealing himself to creation and intervening in history. It is important to qualify biblical divine revelation as deliberate and free because neither is God portrayed as a being revealing Himself by natural necessity nor are creators entitled to receive it. Rather, the biblical God is absolutely sovereign in his decisions; He could also have decided to remain silent and hidden.

Why did not God decide to do so, one may ask. It is hard to speculate about possible what-if-scenarios but here are a few options of religious worldviews with a God remaining completely silent<sup>1</sup>: A first possible scenario is a view of work righteousness, that is, the view that a religious system consists of a set of rules and as long as these rules are observed, salvation by God is guaranteed. A second possible scenario is a view of appeasement, that is, the view that certain rituals have to be performed in order to appease God's wrath and keep divine punishment away. A third possibility is a view of agnosticism, that is, the view that we are in no epistemic position to attain any central religious truths such as God's existence or God's purpose for the universe, and therefore your religious beliefs do not matter when it comes to questions about the meaning of human existence, morality and salvation.

These views indicate that without revelation we are hardly in any position to take up any true beliefs about God's ultimate stance towards us nor is it possible to enter into a personal relationship with God because we cannot bridge the ontological and epistemic divide between a perfect, eternal, omnipotent and omniscient creator on the one hand and us as contingent, frail, erroneous and temporal beings on the other. A revealing God, instead, makes the decisive step over this gap in order to unveil something presumably important to us. And doing so indicates that a revealing God shows concern for the other receiving this revelation – in contrast to a self-sufficient unconcerned Aristotelian God.

### **Propositional and Non-Propositional Revelation**

Traditionally revelation was equated with the transmission of a specific propositional content thanks to some form of divine locution. This view represented revelation as the divine disclosure of truths otherwise inaccessible to human reason, which as a result substantially deepens our knowledge of God.<sup>2</sup> A telling example of this understanding is the dogmatic teaching of Vatican Council I of the Catholic Church. Chapter Two of the Dogmatic Constitution of The Catholic Faith 'Dei Filius' tackles the matter of revelation and declares that God has revealed himself and the eternal laws of his will in such a way that they can be known by everyone without difficulty, with firm certitude and with no intermingling of error.<sup>3</sup> The subsequent chapter on faith declares that faith enables one to believe these revealed

<sup>1</sup> These thoughts echo Davis [Davis, 2008, p. 31].

<sup>2</sup> A good overview of this account provides Dulles [Dulles, 1985, chapter III].

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum20.htm> (last access Dec. 13, 2018).

truths. This primarily propositional account of revelation dominated theological reasoning until the second half of the twentieth century and has still some prominent proponents. Richard Swinburne, for instance, sees revelation primarily as a means for communicating truths, which are good for us to know and which we are unable to find out ourselves such as insights into God's nature, God's salvific plans or moral information about which actions to pursue and which to avoid [Swinburne, 2007, chap. 5: "The Need for Revelation"].

With the raise of historical-critical exegesis this propositional model of revelation has increasingly come under attack. The traditional view that entire biblical writings or central passages thereof represent direct messages from God to the prophets and authors of biblical writings became untenable. As a consequence, biblical writings were interpreted to manifest the religious evolution of the Jewish people from originally crude to more and more adequate and profound forms of understanding God's stance towards creation. In this context, specific events in history were considered to play not only a pivotal role in subjective religious experiences of determinate humans but to constitute divine acts by which the God of Israel has disclosed Himself to mankind. From this perspective, the purpose of revelation consists not in conveying a specific message, which contains some esoteric knowledge required for proper religious belief but it represents a personal encounter with the Godhead Himself. God is unveiling himself in order to enter into a personal relationship and dialogue with humans, which ideally results in trust and surrender to God's salvific will. In other words, revelation of God is primarily self-revelation of a God who calls humans to enter into a trustful, personal and redemptive relationship with God. God wants us to relate to Him in a certain way. This understanding is succinctly summarized by Eleonore Stump in her analysis of the biblical narrative of Abraham:

'The faith that makes Abraham the father of faith has its root in Abraham's acceptance of the goodness of God, Abraham's belief that God will keep his promises, and Abraham's willingness to stake his heart's desire on that belief. In this state, Abraham is surrendering to God, letting go of his self-protective efforts to get what he wants for himself and committing himself in trust to God's goodness.'  
[Stump, 2010, p. 304]

So, among the main accounts to revelation one is propositional – God uttering words to humans – and the other agentive – God acting in human history. The gift of the Ten Commandments, for instance, is an example of the former account; the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt by crossing the Red Sea, instead, constitutes an example of the latter one. One should notice that it is not necessary to juxtapose propositional with non-propositional accounts; in fact, it does not make sense to do so even if someone is skeptical about God revealing himself by uttering words. First of all, each historical event requires an interpretation. Events as such, seen from a purely empirical point of view, are devoid of any meaning. From such a perspective we are able to describe an event according to dimension, number or weight but we are unable to grasp any relevant information concerning our status in the universe, what we ought to do, or what God's plan is for us. Any interpretation of an event, however, is expressed propositionally. Second, if God is revealing

Himself to us in order for us to know Him in a personal way, then conveying such personal knowledge may not be reducible to propositional knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Non-reducibility, however, does not imply that personal knowledge is non-propositional altogether. Understanding what it means to have a personal encounter with God involves propositional knowledge, for instance, that God exists, that God has revealed Himself to me, that God wants me to trust Him or that God enjoys having a personal relationship with me. Thirdly, if one claims that propositions are too general and abstract for putting one's trust in them in contrast to a living and loving person, then again a dichotomy is construed without necessity. It may be true that a proposition as such – isolated from the person uttering it – is abstract, un-lively, cold and unappealing. However, trusting in a person involves as well to trust her what she says. A central dimension of trust in a person is to have made the experience that what she says is true, that she keeps her promises and that she takes responsibility for what she does. It hardly make any sense to claim to trust in a person but to be generally skeptical about what she says and promises.

It is misleading, then, to see a natural tension between a propositional and non-propositional understanding of revelation or to argue even for replacing the former with the latter. One may be skeptical for good reasons about God revealing himself by performing a speech act in a proper sense but such a skepticism is to be distinguished from a rejection of a propositional understanding of revelation altogether. It is true to emphasize that the primary objects of revelation are not some abstract truths about God rather than God Himself and that the primary purpose of God's self-revelation is to enable us to relate to God as a person in a profound, living and trustful manner. However, these revelatory facts go hand in hand with many truths about God and therefore any divine revelation conveys propositions as well. In fact, how should a recipient of divine revelation be ever in a position to reflect upon this experience and speak about what has been revealed if not in propositional terms?

### **The Content of Revelation**

As sacred writings have it, there is not one single revelation but many. According to the Judeo-Christian Tradition, for instance, God spoke to many humans such as Abraham, Moses or the prophets. Thus, one may wonder whether multiple revelations are required for conveying the full message God wants to reveal or – to put it in non-propositional terms – whether a comprehensive understanding of the relationship God wants us to have towards Him is in need of various divine self-revelations. In other words, is God's revelatory strategy a piecemeal endeavor in the sense that latter revelations build on the content of earlier ones and are more accurate and theologically more informative than the previous ones?

It is certainly true that all revelations are to a certain extent partial and incomplete because our cognitive and moral limitations make it impossible to grasp the full extent, profundity and relevance of a self-revelatory act of an almighty,

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<sup>4</sup> Stump is discussing this point in detail. See [Stump 2010, Part I, chap. 3 and 4].

omniscience and morally perfect being. As a consequence, despite of divine self-revelation, God will remain hidden to us in a substantial manner. It is also true that any revelation is contextual, that is, divine self-communication has to be structured in such a way that it corresponds to our bio-psycho-social-cultural constitution. God has to adjust to our existence because there is no way that we can adjust to His. Therefore, each revelation is to some extent distinct in tone and content given the unique individuality of its addressee and her specific historical and cultural context. However, the central theme of each revelation is the same because – as indicated above – revelation is not meant to transmit pieces of interesting ‘esoteric’ information to different people but to disclose how entering a proper relationship to God opens up the way to salvation. By referring to different biblical writings, Gerald O’Colins argues that there is an intrinsic union between revelation and salvation – expressed in linguistic imageries such as the word of the Lord, the good news or the light of revelation and the life of salvation. He writes:

[...] using different terms, Second Isaiah (‘word’), Mark (‘the good news’), John (‘light’ and ‘truth’), and 1John (‘word’) converge in witnessing that divine revelation, when accepted in faith, changes human beings and brings a new, redeemed and graced relationship with God.’ [O’Colins, 2016, p. 36].

Important is to underline that divine revelation is only effective, if it is – as O’Colins notes – accepted in faith. In fact, a revelation can only be recognized as such if accepted in faith by the addressee because, as previously indicated, events do not interpret themselves but require someone to offer an interpretation. Thus, there is something odd in saying that God is revealing himself but none is taking notice of it or someone is misinterpreting it as a rare natural phenomenon or the expression of a psychic disorder. The semantics of ‘revelation’ implies that there is someone revealing, someone to whom something is revealed and that this act of revelation is conceived as such as well. A proper actualization of revelation requires not only a revealing agent but also a corresponding appropriation of what is revealed on the part of the addressee. Acceptance and appropriation of what has been revealed are the ‘success-conditions’ for properly qualifying as an act of revelation, so to speak, because only in this way its salvific content is also rendered effective.<sup>5</sup> Imagine the revelatory act of God speaking to Moses at the burning bush and Moses in his obstinacy is curiously observing this rare phenomenon, trying to find some empirical explanation for it and ultimately explaining it away as a sensory illusion due to dehydration in the desert. If so, Moses offers a plausible empirical interpretation of the event observed and there is nothing far-fetched in doing so. However, it is clear that the success-conditions for revelation are not met in this case because there is no appropriate reaction from the part of Moses. He is not taking notice of the central and decisive dimension of what is occurring. This ultimate ‘target point’ of revelation is succinctly pointed out by Josef Ratzinger when he highlights that revelation ‘per se’ does not exist because it becomes always and only a reality where

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<sup>5</sup> In his classical distinction of different models of revelation, Dulles makes it very explicit that a focal point of theological reasoning in the 20th century concerned the human side of revelation, that is, how revelation is experienced and incorporated in human existence. See Dulles 1985, part I on the different models of revelation proposed.

there is a person accepting an event as revelation in faith and reacting correspondingly to it [Ratzinger, 1965, p. 34].<sup>6</sup> An adequate reaction to an event interpreted as revelation is to accept its salvific power<sup>7</sup> because God is experienced – I Lutheran terms – as turning towards his creatures in judgement and forgiveness or – in terms of Karl Rahner – as enabling his creatures to achieve a higher level of self-transcendence directed towards a closer union with the divine spirit [Rahner, 1965].

### The Metaphysics of Revelation

Reflections so far have been concerned with central features of the ‘nature’ of revelation and appropriate responses to it. I have touched upon the important distinction between propositional and non-propositional accounts to revelation; the former highlighting objective truth and a rather clearly defined body of knowledge, the latter underlining the importance of historical, cultural and (inter-)personal factors requiring corresponding hermeneutical and interpretative approaches. I have emphasized that revelation points at a God aiming at entering into a personal relationship with us and that this relationship is of utmost importance for us because it signifies the way to our salvation. Due to limited space, I ignore many other central issues concerning epistemic aspects of revelation such as how to recognize an occurrence as revelation at all, how to transmit faithfully the content of revelation in history and the role of religious authorities in this process.<sup>8</sup>

Rather, I am focusing on another essential question interestingly often swept under the carpet, which is how to construe the possibility of revelation. One way to address this question is to refer to recent discussions about the possibility of miracles since structural similarities between miracles and revelatory events abound. In both cases the ultimate cause or author of such an event is God, the recipient of miraculous and revelatory events is a human person, through the event a message is conveyed, which highlights something highly relevant for our relationship to God and this message for unfolding its transformative effect has to be accepted by the human person in faith. Thus, in the remainder of this essay I will outline an approach to the metaphysical conditions for the possibility of revelation<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> The entire original passage reads follows: „Denn Offenbarung wird immer und nur erst da Wirklichkeit, wo Glaube ist. Der Nichtglaubende [...] kann die Schrift lesen und wissen, was in ihr steht, sogar rein gedanklich begreifen, was gemeint ist und wie ihre Aussagen zusammenhängen – dennoch ist er nicht der Offenbarung teilhaftig geworden. [...] Insofern gehört in die Offenbarung bis zu einem gewissen Grad auch das empfangende Subjekt hinein, ohne das sie nicht existiert. Man kann Offenbarung nicht in die Tasche stecken, wie man ein Buch mit sich tragen kann. Sie ist eine lebendige Wirklichkeit, die einen lebendigen Menschen als Ort ihrer Anwesenheit verlangt.“

<sup>7</sup> [Bultmann, 1971, p. 47], speaks of salvific revelation. The German term is Heilsoffenbarung.

<sup>8</sup> An overview about recent epistemic discussions concerning these issues gives Wojtysiak [Wojtysiak, 2014] who discusses Zagzebski’s models of revelation and epistemic authority.

<sup>9</sup> These reflections are based on [Gasser, Quitterer, 2015].

## 1. A Metaphysics of Powerful Particulars

The Humean tradition has proven to be extraordinarily powerful when it comes to reflect the God-world-relationship. Considering laws of nature as exception-less regularities resulting from observations that events of type *X* are followed by events of type *Y* leads to the view that miracles ought to be conceived of as unique events in the natural history, which violate such exception-less regularities. An often not explicitly considered background assumption in this context is Hume's acceptance of an all-encompassing determinism. Conceptualizing miracles as violations of laws of nature is intimately linked to such a deterministic assumption [Saudek, 2017], which in the view of modern science ought to be considered as problematic and unjustified. In addition, the concept of a violation of a law of nature is a contradiction in terms because exception-less regularities allow for no exceptions per definition. Thus, once such an exception takes place the affected regularity is not exception-less and therefore no law of nature anymore even though it would still be applicable to all other similar instances. This, however, appears to be an overly harsh conclusion. It appears to be easier to acknowledge a miracle as an exception from a general suitable natural law instead of jettisoning such a law altogether.

In the light of these disputable assumptions and problematic results, some philosophers have proposed as an alternative to consider natural laws structurally similar to normative laws.<sup>10</sup> The idea is that normative terms suggest that something should be the case, even if it is not always so. If the state legislates payment of one's taxes, then I should pay my taxes; if moral goodness requires me to offer help, then I should offer help; if a law prohibits to dump one's waste in the river, then I should not dump my waste there. Similarly, a natural law states how an individual *x* of the substantial kind *K* is disposed to exhibit a range of characteristic dispositions under given circumstances. When I say, for instance, that a particular chemical *x* is explosive under circumstances *C*, then I am saying that *x* possesses specific dispositions because *x* belongs to a certain kind *K*. The corresponding natural law expresses what kind of behavior is expected from *x* as an instantiated individual belonging to *K* under specific circumstances *C*.<sup>11</sup> That is, a law of nature refers to the dispositions of ordinary individuals of kind *K* to behave under specific circumstances. Such a law of nature does not entail the strong statement how an individual of a certain kind will necessarily act or react; rather, it tells us 'only' what range of behavior should be expected from an individual of this kind. Such a normative account can easily differentiate between exceptions from the norm, on the one hand, and the deviation of normal members from their kind, on the other. Take for instance a polar bear with a brown coat. Assuming that normal polar bears have white coats, this deviation from the standard could be caused due to a genetic abnormality. This does not falsify the general law 'Polar bears have white coats' since this law

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, the contributions of Lowe [Lowe, 1987] or Mumford [Mumford, 1998] and [Mumford, 2001].

<sup>11</sup> [Lowe, 2006, 8.4.–8.6].

does not express a necessity but a general tendency of polar bears to have white coats.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, one can accept a normative account to natural laws once a dispositional understanding of the causal workings in the world is considered as a viable meta-physical possibility. The normative character of natural laws grounds in the dispositional set-up of the entities populating our material world.<sup>13</sup> Recall that according to Lowe's normative account a natural law involves both a dispositional predication term and a substantial-kind term because it states the dispositions characteristic of a specific substantial kind. On this view, a given instance of predication asserts that an individual object of a particular kind has actualized its characteristic dispositions. 'Polar bears are white' says that instances of the substantial kind 'polar bear' have the (natural) disposition to be white. 'This polar bear is white', instead, means that a concrete instance of the substantial kind 'polar bear' has actualized the typical disposition of being white. A universal property having being in a dispositional mode has been instantiated and thus changed to its actualization mode. Taking dispositions to be real properties in the world, we can argue that the normative character of natural laws indicates which dispositions reside in a specific substantial kind. Exceptions to the norm may be surprising but can be integrated in this account because they can simply be thought of as the manifestation of other, less common, dispositions residing in this specific substantial kind as well but becoming manifest only under very specific, rare circumstances.

How does this view relate to a so-called special divine intervention such a revelation? Against the background of the explicated dispositional understanding of reality, a revelation can be interpreted as the activation of a dispositional setup of a substance hidden under normal circumstances. Consider again Moses and the burning bush. The bush is burning but not consumed by the fire because 'the fire has no power' over the bush in this specific case due to God's will of activating another power, which renders the bush unharmed. Consequently, the fire's characteristic power to consume organic material remains non-manifested.

In such a situation the relevant laws of nature remain valid; but, since they supervene on the dispositions of the substances involved, they are not manifested because the additional power of God's will alters the original base upon which the natural laws depend. The addition of a new power to the dispositional base changes the outcome from what we would have expected – given our experience with the 'ordinary' base in place in all other instances observed so far.

Thomas Aquinas proposes a similar account in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* when he discusses the possibility of God's acting beyond (*preater*) the natural order. According to Aquinas, a divine intervention would violate the natural order (*ordo naturalis*) only if natural causes were to produce their effects necessarily. Since this

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<sup>12</sup> Of course, were we to discover that this exception represents a norm of its own, for instance, if a sub-species of polar bears in an isolated Artic region tend to have brown coats, then the general norm has to be limited in its scope.

<sup>13</sup> For a theist such a view is even easier to accept because one can consider natural laws to flow from God's mind and will: God decided to create this universe containing these and not different natural laws. Therefore, any distinction between natural and normative laws is gradual at best because the starting point of both types of law is the divine mind and will.

is not the case, however, because each substance has only a certain inclination to ‘do more this than that’ (ST Ia IIae, q. 1, a. 2), all what is established is a mere regularity without necessity in nature.<sup>14</sup> Aquinas writes:

‘Now, if someone says that, since God did implant this order in things, the production in things of an effect independently of its proper causes, and apart from the order established by Him, could not be done without a change in this order, this objection can be refuted by the very nature of things. For the order imposed on things by God is based on what usually occurs, in most cases, in things, but not on what is always so. In fact, many natural causes produce their effects in the same way, but not always.’ (ScG. III, q. 99, n. 9).

In the light of such a view, any talk of ‘breaking the natural order’ or ‘violating the laws of nature’ is misleading because the modal force of necessity is not present in nature. Rather, more powerful substances can act upon less powerful ones and impress their powers upon them without thereby violating any law of nature. Such an interaction between two substances is not ‘violent’ (*non violentus*) as Aquinas underlines but according to their respective natures (ScG. III, q. 100, n. 4). As a consequence, God – being omnipotent – can freely act upon any creature without thereby acting contrary to that entity’s natural powers.

## 2. Divine Powers and Revelation

A metaphysics of powerful particulars provides a useful framework for proposing a metaphysical model of revelation in terms of God actualizing His self-revealing power by acting upon other substances. However, such an account does not suffice for an adequate understanding of revelation. If revelation is analyzed exclusively in terms of a combination of powers, a causal effect would be the result of a set of powers exercised at specific levels of intensity. The effect will occur when the powers taken together reach a specific threshold required for a specific effect. However, on such a picture of aggregating powers, there is no qualitatively different role for a supernatural cause. It would be just one additional power in a set of already existing natural powerful particulars acting upon each other.

At this point an immediate problem lurks: If the supernatural power is all-powerful, then it is hard to see how it could interact with natural powers at all because nothing could interfere with its causal agency. The consequence would be that all possible effects of natural powers to produce other effects than those the supernatural power causes would be completely neutralized. A maximally strong power that is unable to control its own power-manifestations is ultimately unable to maintain entities with weaker powers in their existence because the maximally strong power would simply supersede them. Metaphorically speaking, all created substances with their respective powers would be swallowed by God as the supreme and ultimate power, in the same way that a black hole exercises such a strong gravitational effect

<sup>14</sup> For Aquinas, the best available explanation for the regular behavior of entities requires the positing of (active and passive) powers and inclinations. Reference to the thing’s inclination explains the intrinsic feature disposing it to cause some forms of effect more than others.

that nothing physical can escape from inside it. In order to avoid this consequence, it is essential to underline that God is not just endowed with causal powers of maximal strength but a rational agent able to determine and regulate His powers by will. Entities endowed with rational powers are fundamentally different from entities lacking them because the latter are disposed towards one effect only, whereas rational powers are ‘capable of opposite effects’, as Aristotle notes in the *Metaphysics* (Aristotle 1046b, 4–5). A rational agent disposes of a number of different reasons and accordingly alternative possibilities for action are a distinctive feature of an entity endowed with rational powers. For this reason, a complete understanding of the sort of modality operative in revelation points strongly toward causation by a powerful, free, and rational agent. Only as a free rational agent, God is able to control the way in which, and the extent to which He manifests His powers at all levels of creation. Aquinas emphasizes this point as follows:

Now, universal active power can be limited in two ways for the purpose of producing a particular effect. One way is by means of a particular intermediate cause: thus, the active power of a celestial body is limited to the effect of generating human beings by the particular power which is in the semen [...] Another way is by means of understanding, which apprehends a definite form and produces it in the effect. But the divine understanding is capable of knowing not only the divine essence which is like a universal active power, and also not only of knowing universal and first causes, but all particular ones, as is clear from the things said above. Therefore, it is able to produce immediately every effect that any particular agent can bring about (ScG. III, q. 99, n. 3).

Thus, thinking of God as an all-powerful being who is able to change the original causal settings of any substance requires to be supplemented with a conception of God as a (maximally) rational, free and morally perfect being. Thereby God is able to limit and adjust His otherwise limitless powers according to the specific circumstances of an act of divine self-revelation.

### **3. Revelation and (Natural) Dispositions**

For a realist account to dispositions and powers it makes sense to assume that a thing’s existence and persistence conditions depend on its dispositions and powers. An elm seed, which is not disposed to grow elm leaves anymore but pine needles instead, can hardly be regarded as an elm seed. A substance is what it is in virtue of its dispositions and powers, and if these dispositions and powers change, then it makes sense to ask whether this change – if substantial enough – does not cause the end of the substance. Given this understanding of a thing’s existence and persistence, one might wonder how we should think about the capacity to accept and appropriate an event of divine self-revelation. Are we naturally disposed towards divine revelation or has God first to install in us a new disposition being open towards it because in our (post-lapsarian) state our natural inclination tends towards loneliness and self-encapsulation?

I begin to answer this question by making use of E.J. Lowe’s distinction between an individual substance’s sortal persistence-conditions and its identity-conditions

[Lowe, 1998, p. 183–184]. The former are the conditions under which an individual substance persists as an instance of a substantial kind. The latter are the conditions under which an individual substance is re-identifiable over time. Distinguishing these two types of condition enables us to account for the metaphysical possibility of radical change. It might be metaphysically possible for an entity, for instance the figure Actaeon in Ovid's metamorphoses, to start life as a human and yet to survive a metamorphosis into a deer. However, since the sortal persistence-conditions of human beings do not allow for this type of change, the post-metamorphosis Actaeon is not merely a human being in the gestalt of a deer, but a real deer. Actaeon does not undergo a mere phase change, but a substantial change. If Proteus, the ancient sea-god, were to undergo this kind of transformation instead, it would amount to a mere phase change because it is part of the very nature of Proteus to be able to undergo varied gestalt-changes. With Lowe's distinction at hand, one might argue that natural substantial kinds are a sub-species of the higher-order supernatural substantial kind of 'creature' because all natural substantial kinds are created by God. Focusing on natural kinds alone, thus, provides a limited perspective on a thing's ultimate persistence conditions because those of a creature allow that all instances falling under it can undergo also profound changes due to God's will while still remaining the same.

Realizing that each creature depends fundamentally on the divine will makes any search for a form of natural self-maintenance grounded in a creature itself idle. Therefore an occurrence of a revelation cannot obstruct or delete the causal powers of its addressee; rather, it manifests the basic feature of creatureliness, which is to be oriented towards God. Robert Adams proposes this line of thought when he surmises:

[...] the most fundamental natural faculty of any created substance is its liability to be affected by God.' [Adams, 1992, p. 224].

It might be more precise to drop the term 'natural' in this case. If God creates the world with regard to the eschatological purpose of salvation, then it is not bold to claim that each creature possesses the fundamental disposition to be open to God's salvific will. If so, a divine self-revelatory act does not contravene a substance's nature; rather it is in deep harmony with it because it actualizes the most fundamental disposition of any creature, which is to draw nearer to God and being affected, respectively, transformed by Him.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, the causal profile stemming from scientific investigations is just the 'natural' share of a substance's total creaturely dispositional set-up, which ultimately is directed toward salvific transformation. Of course, referring to the total creaturely dispositional set-up does not imply that God acting upon it in revelation initiates an automatism resulting in the manifestation of the disposition to be related to God. Humans as rational and free beings can positively respond to God's self-revelation in faith; however, they also have the liberty of not recognizing themselves as recipients of it and of rejecting the divine offer of salvation.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Think of Rom 8, 18–22: The entire creation suffers and longs that its deepest inclination, being close to God, be realized.

<sup>16</sup> How divine and human (free) will collaborate and what causal contribution humans have to bring about for an adequate response in faith are unsolved theological riddles, which due to lack of space

To conclude, it is illuminating to reconstruct shortly against the sketched dispositional background the divine attribute of omnipresence in relation to revelation. If God is omnipresent in creation, then divine self-revelation is not a rarely manifested divine disposition but ‘omni-manifested’, which, however, appears unrevealed and hidden from us because our dispositional set-up is generally not (yet) in the state of receiving it. Divine self-revelation is the ‘experiential side’ of divine omnipresence, so to say, which reported biblical figures like the prophets next to saints and other persons in history came to enjoy. The cause that divine self-revelation is such a rare occurrence is not due to God but due to our current (fallen) state. We are not attuned to God’s omnipresence in the universe and therefore we generally perceive God as hidden and distant, whereas instances of divine self-revelation are rare exceptions from this general perceptive attitude on our side.

If God is not an Aristotelian self-sufficient God but a God being present in creation by His power<sup>17</sup> and pursuing our salvation, then it is obvious to assume that God’s loving openness towards His creatures is a constant dimension of divine existence and not a disposition being only manifested from time to time. God as pure act is not actualizing dispositions here and there but is constantly present to and as such in a permanent self-revelatory mode to His creation. Such a view does not contradict the biblical datum that God is revealing Himself differently at different places as biblical narratives such as God wrestling with Jacob, God speaking to Moses from the burning bush or God transforming the life of the apostles at Pentecost indicate. These and other examples seem to presuppose that God is manifesting Himself in a singular way at a particular place and that God is simultaneously not present in this specific way at any other place. An omni-present God is in an ‘omni-self-revelatory’ mode but God still has the possibility to ‘channel’ this manifested power differently depending on the various dispositional set-ups of the revelation’s recipients. Take the example of Moses and the burning bush. I am reluctant to claim that God is unveiling His presence in a stronger sense in the burning bush and in a weaker sense in the ground around the bush, which is also described as ‘holy’. Rather, one may be inclined to interpret such passages as an expression of our human perception of personal presence. Perceiving a person goes hand in hand with identifying her face or body as her center and her limbs as periphery. These distinctions, though to a certain extent conventional and vague, come natural and structure how we perceive and think of persons. An analogous case can be made when encountering God. Due to our perceptive and rational capacities, we cannot do otherwise but identify a center and a periphery of the theophany, although God’s omnipresence does not come in degrees. However, as the same manifested power acting upon different dispositions can cause different manifestations, so one and the same God being present to different human individuals will result in different self-revelatory occurrences. The richness of human religious experience with the divine is, thus not owed to an ever-changing God but to the divine recognition of human individuality. By entering into human history, divine self-revelation comprises the recognition on the part of

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cannot be addressed at this point. One interesting recent contribution to this debate is Timpe [Timpe, 2015].

<sup>17</sup> See Peter Lombard 1971–1981, *Sententiae I*, d. 37, c. 1, n. 2.

the human addressee that God becomes present to me as human individual as God ‘for me’, that is, as God placing me as his singled-out creature in His personal salvific relationship<sup>18</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

In current debates, the dominating questions concerning revelation are epistemic. In this modest proposal, I have outlined the metaphysical conditions underlying divine self-revelation in terms of a metaphysics of powerful particulars. This account proves to be insightful under several respects. First, when reconstructing traditional divine attributes in terms of powers, one may claim that a perfect being exemplifies all these attributes always in a perfect manner, that is, there are no dispositional modes in a perfect being or manifestations in degrees and less than perfect. As a consequence, God is not revealing himself only from time to time to particular individuals; rather, God is omnipresent to creation and as such always in a mode of self-revelation. The cause of not being aware of this constant divine self-revelation is our (post-lapsarian) nature, which makes us unable to manifest our inherent creaturely disposition to be positively affected and transformed by God. Secondly, conceiving of God as being in a permanent actualization of self-revelation helps to metaphysically ground the claim that all revelations are conveying one and the same message – God’s salvific purpose of drawing us ever nearer to Him. Thirdly, different reported occurrences of revelations can be explained in terms of dispositional differences in humans because God’s unchanging self-revealing power is affecting different dispositions in the human recipient shaped by biological, cognitive, biographical, social and cultural factors. Finally, it has to be underlined that such a metaphysical reconstruction of God’s revelatory presence in creation remains inherently asymmetrical. The gap between God and creation remains unchallenged from the side of creation. God’s self-revelation does not add anything to creation; rather the self-revealing God is opening up possibilities for creation to accommodate more and more to the salvific will of an omnipresent God by letting God transform us in faith.

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<sup>18</sup> This view conforms particularly well with the models of revelation dubbed by Dulles as “inner experience”, and “ew awareness”.

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