

In order to clarify further the nature and extent of the natural knowledge of God, let us distinguish between three degrees of cognitive development in the natural knowledge of God. One degree of development is pre-philosophical, a second is imperfect or rudimentary philosophical knowledge of God, and a third is perfect knowledge or rigorous philosophical demonstration of God's existence. Each of these forms of knowledge differs in its intellectual sophistication and the extent to which it is found among human beings. The teaching that God can be known by the natural light of reason may thus be understood in terms of three claims:

1. *All human beings have a pre-theoretical knowledge of God.* This sort of knowledge comes to be in all cognizant human beings more or less spontaneously as we live in and think about the world. It is general and confused knowledge—so general and confused, so primordial in our experience, that one is not necessarily even reflectively aware of knowing God. One knows God without realizing it, for one knows him by a name other than God. Aquinas describes two ways of having this pre-theoretical knowledge of God.

In the first way, St. Thomas Aquinas writes:

*To know that God exists in a general and confused way is implanted in us by nature, inasmuch as God is man's beatitude. For man naturally desires happiness, and what is naturally desired by man must be naturally known to him. This, however, is not to know absolutely that God exists; just as to know that someone is approaching is not the same as to know that Peter is approaching, even though it is Peter who is approaching... (ST I.2.1 ad 1; SCG I c.11)*

All human beings are aware of goodness in general or have a notion of what goodness is—even if they cannot philosophically define goodness. It is the same with happiness. We all have a notion of it even if we cannot say what it is. Furthermore, all of us know that goodness and

happiness are real. For we aim at them by nature, and expect our aim to succeed. Just by having the notion of what goodness is or what happiness is, and by knowing that goodness and happiness are there to be had, one knows God. We could say that one knows God by the name of goodness or by the name of happiness rather than distinctly as God. Aquinas compares this sort of knowledge to seeing someone afar off coming over a hill without knowing it is Peter coming over the hill.

## The Existence of God according to Reason / Part II

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A second way of having pre-theoretical knowledge of God is from world order. St. Thomas Aquinas writes:

*For there is a common and confused knowledge of God which is found in practically all human beings; this is due... to the fact that... humans can immediately reach some sort of knowledge of God by natural reason.*

*For, when human beings see that things in nature run according to a definite order, and that ordering does not occur without an orderer, they perceive in most cases that there is some orderer of the things that we see. But who or what kind of being, or whether there is but one orderer of nature, is not yet grasped immediately in this general consideration. (SCG III c. 38)*

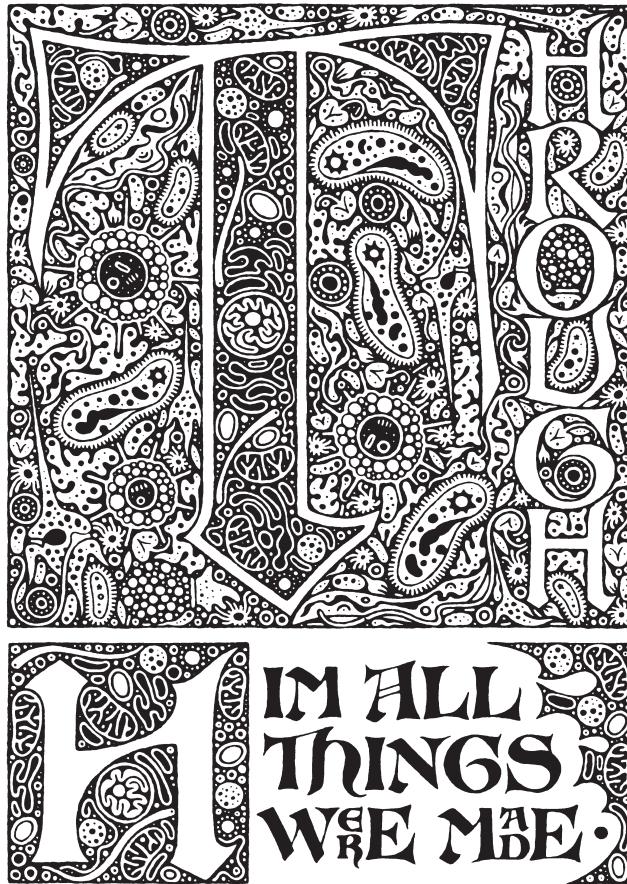
When human beings gaze upon the beauty, order, and harmony of the world as a whole, they commonly form the judgment that “there must be *something* behind it all.” In this knowledge, they know God by the name of *something*, but not yet distinctly as God. What that something is remains an open question to the inquirer, but one knows at a minimum that *something* is there to look into further.

Generally speaking, the pre-theoretical knowledge is deeply compelling, often virtually indefeasible in one's mind, a powerful starting point of inquiry, recurring food for thought, and coupled with the innate desire to understand it could drive one to elaborate philosophical arguments for the existence of God as a way of trying to put into words what one knows in a more primordial way.

*2. Many human beings have an imperfect philosophical knowledge of God.* Although we all start with a pre-theoretical or general and confused knowledge of God, human beings cannot be satisfied with it, for all human beings by nature desire to understand. And we are all fallen as well. Because we are driven by our nature to understand, many people unfold what they already know in a general and confused way into a clearer and more distinct understanding. Because we are fallen, however, human beings can also refuse or oppose this process of cognitive development and effectively deny at a higher level what we know at a lower level. For those open to knowing the existence of God more perfectly than in the pre-theoretical way, the process of cognitive development advances according to our differing intellectual aptitudes, various degrees of free time for thinking, and differing degrees of concern for intellectual penetration of the subject matter. Many people take first faltering steps at trying to articulate their general and confused knowledge of God in more theoretical statements and arguments.

Hence, it is common to come across popular arguments for the existence of God. Someone may say: "everything has a cause, but the causes can't go back forever, so there must be a God." Another may say: "whatever is designed has a designer, and the world is designed, so there must be a Designer." These arguments represent first (or second or third) attempts to express some of the deepest intuitions of human reason about the ultimate meaning of all things. They are rudimentary philosophical arguments, and at whatever degree of sophistication they are developed they are open to easy refutation by someone with just a little more philosophical skill or to rejection by someone who is less astute at philosophy.

An objector may point out that if everything has a cause, then God too must have a cause, so the argument raises a problem for the proponent.



Someone may point out that to say that the world is designed in fact begs a big question. *Is* the world in fact designed? Does not that claim presuppose the existence of God rather than prove it? In each of these cases, the objector may be genuinely more intelligent, or more thoughtful, or more philosophical, or more educated than the proponent of the argument for God. However, both sides can easily forget that a good argument can appear bad to one who is not very intelligent. In fact, most people—both proponents and opponents—of the existence of God are living and thinking in this second degree of development of the natural knowledge of God. Philosophical arguments for the existence of God, and objections to them, fall along a spectrum of philosophical sophistication and rigor. Rigorous philosophical demonstrations are for the few: the intelligent, the educated, and the dialectically skilled.

In the final part of this three-part essay, we will consider several proofs for the existence of God.

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