

# Confronting the Cosmos Scientific Rationality and Human Understanding<sup>1</sup>

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## *1. Natural knowledge of God and the neutrality of the cosmos.*

A notable passage in Paul's letter to the Romans declares that "ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made."<sup>2</sup> The idea seems to be that we can all infer God's existence from observable features of the natural world. And not just that we can do so, but that that we *ought* to—for Paul goes on to declare (in the same verse) that those who fail to recognize the divine authorship of the world and in consequence fail to give him thanks are "inexcusable".<sup>3</sup> Following this lead, there is a long tradition in Christian philosophical thought that maintains that natural inferential knowledge of God is readily available to humans. Aquinas's approach in the five ways provides a conspicuous example. And the First Vatican Council reaffirmed this tradition in 1870, when, explicitly invoking the passage from Paul, it laid it down that "God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known, from created things, by the light of natural human reason."<sup>4</sup>

It seems as unambiguous a position as anyone could wish. But actually, things are not quite as simple as may at first appear. The Pauline passage, though affirming our knowledge of God on the basis of his works, makes it clear that the divine attributes themselves, God's power and divine nature, are *not* known: they are beyond our ken, or as Paul puts it, *invisible*. This is in line with the frequent warnings in the New Testament, prefigured in the Hebrew Bible, that God is not to be seen by human eyes: he dwells (as the letter to Timothy expresses it) "in light inaccessible, whom no man hath seen or can see"; or, as the book of Exodus puts it, rather more dramatically, no man can see God and live.<sup>5</sup> Consistently with this, when we come to Aquinas, although the Five Ways patently aim to demonstrate God from his effects, the conception of God so arrived at is, in the words of one distinguished commentator, Brian Davies, a very "minimalist" one<sup>6</sup>: the proofs don't disclose the nature of the invisible God, but simply allow us to infer the

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<sup>1</sup> This is a draft of a paper the definitive version of which appeared in *Proceedings of the ACPA* (Philosophy Documentation Center), Vol. 85 (2011), pp. 27-42.

<sup>2</sup> τὰ γὰρ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου τοῖς ποιήμασιν νοούμενα καθορᾶται, ἢ τε ἀίδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θεϊότης. Romans 1:20. The thought is a recapitulation of earlier ideas, found for example in The Wisdom of Solomon, 13:1 "Surely vain are all men by nature who are ignorant of God, and could not out of the good things that are seen know him that is; neither by considering the works did they acknowledge the workmaster".

<sup>3</sup> *anapologētos*. Romans 1:20. Compare Wisdom, 18:8: "Neither are they to be pardoned".

<sup>4</sup> sancta mater Ecclesia tenet et docet, Deum, rerum omnium principium et finem, naturali humanae rationis lumine e rebus creatis certo cognosci posse: "invisibilia enim ipsius a creatura mundi, per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta, conspiciuntur" [Rom 1. 20]. First Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith (*Dei Filius*) [1870], Ch. 2.

<sup>5</sup> God dwells in "light inaccessible, whom no man hath seen nor can see" (φῶς οἰκῶν ἀπρόσιτον, ὃν εἶδεν οὐδεὶς ἀνθρώπων οὐδὲ ἰδεῖν δύναται), I Timothy 6:16. Cf. Colossians 1:15: Christ, who has "delivered us from the power of darkness" is the "image of the invisible God" (εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου). See also I John 4:12 ("No man hath seen God at any time"). For the Hebrew Bible, see Exodus 33:17, 20 (Moses) and I Kings 19:13 (Elijah): no human can see God and live.

<sup>6</sup> B. Davies, *Aquinas* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 27.

existence of an original, uncaused, unmoved *something*, an ultimate X, to which, as Aquinas puts it, we apply the label “God”.<sup>7</sup> And finally, to come to the passage from the First Vatican Council document, although a place for natural reason is clearly affirmed, this affirmation occurs in in a concessive clause, which immediately leads on to an emphasis on the role *not* of natural inference but of special divine revelation and faith—the main subject of the document in question. So the sense of the relevant passage is somewhat as follows: although the mysterious and invisible God *can* certainly be inferred by the natural light via created things, nevertheless the truths on which our salvation depends are those revealed to the eyes of faith. The text goes on to say “this faith, which is the beginning of man's salvation, is a supernatural virtue, whereby ... we believe that the things which he has revealed are true ... *not* because of the intrinsic truth of the things, viewed by the natural light of reason ...” And it concludes by quoting the definition of faith in the letter to the Hebrews (1:11): faith is “the substance of things hoped for, the conviction of things *that appear not*.”<sup>8</sup>

So despite Paul’s thundering about those who fail to infer God being “inexcusable”, and despite Vatican I’s insistence that there can be natural knowledge of God, the emerging picture from a closer reading of these texts is that the natural light won’t actually get us very far when it comes to knowing God. So even in what may be called mainstream Catholic Christianity, the results achievable by natural reason alone are somewhat limited; and I take it that the Protestant tradition is for the most part even more sceptical about what reason alone can tell us of God (think of Kierkegaard, for example; or, in the twentieth century, Karl Barth, who actually urged people to “turn their back on natural theology as a great temptation and source of error”<sup>9</sup>).

I don’t, however, want to become embroiled in denominational controversies in this paper, but to try to get clear, from a philosophical perspective, on what it makes sense to say about natural knowledge of God—that is, the kind of knowledge that might be available to any human being, without the aid of special divine grace or revelation. Let me start by saying outright that it’s hard to accept Paul’s stern insistence that those who fail to acknowledge God in this way are blameworthy, or “without excuse”, as he puts it. For it seems abundantly clear, at any rate speaking in our own contemporary context, that there are many sincere atheists and agnostics: people who have honestly scrutinized the arguments and the evidence available from a purely rational perspective, and have found them wanting. It’s very hard to believe that such

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<sup>7</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [1266-73], Part I, question 2, article 3 (“and this we call God”, or some such phrase, is found at the end of each of the Five Ways).

<sup>8</sup> *Dei Filius*, Ch. 3. The Greek word here translated as “substance” is *hypostasis*. But this rendering (found for example in the King James Version) that makes things sound, to my ear, far too settled and solid. *Hypostasis*, rather, is a prop or support. I have argued elsewhere that a the willed act of trust can be epistemically facilitating—it opens us to seeing what, if all goes well, will confirm the appropriateness of the trust—and also psychologically and morally facilitating (it supports or reinforces the hopeful pursuit of something that is not yet in our grasp. It’s worth adding that in the second half of the phrase, “the certainty of things unseen”, the Greek term is *elenchus*. But *elenchus* in Greek is a demanding, open-ended process—like the *elenchus* Socrates made famous—a probing inquiry, a reaching forward, which might lead to impasse or *aporia*. So, to transfer this to the religious context, faith is a reaching forward—not, to be sure in the Socratic spirit of critical inquiry, but still as a kind of risk, a test, like thrusting a piece of iron into the fire that will test it, and either destroy it or temper and refine it so as to make it stronger.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Barth, *Nein!* [1934] transl. in Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002) p. 75; cited in B. Davies, “Is God Beyond Reason?”, *Philosophical Investigations* 32:4 October 2009, p. 342.

people have just omitted to draw obvious inferences or that they have culpably failed to notice something they ought to have noticed. On the contrary, it's much more plausible, I think, to regard the universe as contemplated from an impartial and open-minded perspective as *poker-faced*, to coin a phrase once used by the existentialist writer Colin Wilson: "the world," he said, "appears to have "no grain", to be poker-faced when interrogated about its relation to human aspirations and destiny".<sup>10</sup>

The processes giving rise to our planet and its biological systems can often appear to be at best *blank* or *neutral* with regard to us and our human concerns. The vision of the poet A. E. Housman of a "heartless, witless Nature" that "neither cares nor knows"<sup>11</sup> about us and our activities, seems entirely consistent with a physical and biological system which allows entire species to be swept away, and countless individuals to perish in the struggle to gain enough nutrition even to survive and reproduce. By "heartless", of course, Housman does not mean that nature is cruel or callous, merely that it is not the sort of thing to have emotional concerns or awareness of any kind—it just *is*. Or as Tennyson so graphically put it in *In Memoriam*, imagining Nature speaking: "Thou makest thine appeal to *me*: I bring to life, I bring to death/The spirit does but mean the breath/ I know no more".<sup>12</sup> Yet on the other side, the following vision, recently articulated by England's Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, is arguably also consistent with the observed facts:

The story told by modern cosmology and Darwinian biology is wondrous almost beyond belief. It tells of a universe astonishingly precisely calibrated for the emergence, first of stars, then of second-, third- and fourth-generation stars, then of the formation of planets, one of which met exactly the conditions for the possibility of life. Then, in a way that still remains utterly mysterious, life emerged and evolved, through billions of years, yielding self-organizing systems of ever-increasing complexity, until finally one life form appears capable of standing outside its biological drives for long enough to become self-conscious ... and sensing in all of this a vast intelligence that set it in motion and a caring presence that brought it into being in love.<sup>13</sup>

Which is more plausible—the view of Housman or the view of Sacks? Over half the world's population appear to believe that something like the second view is more plausible; but it is not my purpose to decide that question here. My point is that either view appears, in a certain light, to be quite tenable on rational grounds, and it does not seem remotely plausible to think that either side has made a simple inferential error, or blame-worthily failed to advert to certain manifest observational facts. You may, of course, say that the second, religious, picture, in speaking of a loving creator, wantonly fails to acknowledge the appalling facts of biological waste and individual suffering; or you may say that the first, purely naturalist picture, with its stress on a blind impersonal process, wantonly ignores the overwhelming improbability of

<sup>10</sup> Colin Wilson, *Beyond the Outsider* (London: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> "For Nature, heartless, witless nature,/Will neither care nor know/What stranger's feet may find the meadow/And trespass there, and go/Nor ask, amid the dews of morning/If they be mine or no." Final stanza of "Tell me not here, it needs not saying", A. E. Housman, *Last Poems* [1922], XL, repr. in *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), pp. 152-3.

<sup>12</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam* [1850], lvi.

<sup>13</sup> J. Sacks, *The Great Partnership: God, Science and the Search for Meaning* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011), p. 232.

complex conscious life emerging from a random series of contingencies. Both these adversarial strategies have been tried, but neither obviously succeeds; and it seems most reasonable to conclude that on present evidence the honours are even. The universe, as scrutinized by an impartial and rational spectator, is indeed poker-faced; and, *pace* Paul's strictures, those who do not see it as the work of a divine creator are, at the very least, not guilty of any obvious error of logic or observation.

## 2. *The epistemic context for human awareness of God*

One might conclude from the discussion so far that rational inquiry about God leads to a standoff, or an *impasse*, at least on the basis of evidence available to the natural light of rational inquiry. But before we rush to the Scottish verdict of "not proven", the idea of something's being obvious to the natural light may need further scrutiny. Our original Pauline text says that since the creation God's invisible attributes, his eternal power and divinity, being grasped or understood (*noumena*) through his works, have been seen since the creation of the world. The King James translation, instead of just "seen", says "*clearly* seen", an emphasis followed in many subsequent English versions; but the original Greek verb *kathorao* lacks any such implication of obviousness—it simply means to see or observe or discern.<sup>14</sup> This prompts the thought that the divine authorship of the world might be something that is not supposed to be just clear or obvious to anyone who looks at it, but which might require a certain discernment or understanding to grasp.<sup>15</sup>

One analogy here might be that of scientific truths, such as some of the truths of modern nuclear physics: these may be clear enough, once the scientific work has been done to make the structure of the relevant phenomena intelligible, but they first require diligent and complex investigation to enable them to be uncovered and grasped. If knowledge of God is like this, then it could hardly be inexcusable not to attain to it, since many people might not be in a position to analyse the relevant evidence, or to follow the complicated arguments needed to make the divine origins of our world discernible.

Of course there are a number of very distinguished philosophers of religion who do indeed think that knowledge of God is to be established on the basis of more or less complex probabilistic reasoning.<sup>16</sup> Although I greatly respect the high philosophical quality of much of this work, I do not happen to favour this approach myself, partly because (as already indicated) I am impressed by the "poker-faced" nature of the universe when it is impartially and dispassionately scrutinized, and partly because I think that we are not really in a position to speculate about what might have caused the cosmos, or what its observable features might reveal about its authorship, since when we are dealing with something *ex hypothesi* utterly unique, the mysterious singularity that is the existing universe, all normal probabilistic and inferential reasoning must break down. (So I agree here with the Dominican thinker Herbert McCabe, that invoking God does not have genuine explanatory power in anything like the scientific sense—it does not dissolve the mystery of existence.)<sup>17</sup> That, however, is a debate which I shan't pursue

<sup>14</sup> Luther's German version has simply *ersehen*.

<sup>15</sup> This would be consistent with Paul's typically intense way of expressing himself: the phrase τὰ ἀόρατα ... καθορᾶται (things invisible are seen) is evidently a kind of paradox or oxymoron deliberately used for rhetorical effect.

<sup>16</sup> Most notably and most impressively by Richard Swinburne, in a series of distinguished studies; see especially *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Compare Herbert McCabe, *Faith Within Reason* (London: Continuum, 2007).

here, since I want in this paper to shift the focus to a *different kind of knowledge*, one that seems more relevant to Paul's wider purposes in his letter to the Romans, but more important—since my concern here is not with scriptural exegesis but with the epistemic status of religious belief—one that illuminates something crucial about how knowledge of God might reasonably be expected to become available to human beings.

When one reflects on traditional religious understandings of the nature and purposes of God, at any rate in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, I think it becomes clear that the scientific analogy for knowledge of God is curiously beside the point. To read the canonical texts of the great Abrahamic faiths is to realise that the principal focus of religious belief is not on explanatory hypotheses about the world or the workings of nature, but rather on the meaning of human existence, and about how we should live our lives. The collective evidence of Scripture, which is a rich source for our grasp of what is involved in religious belief and allegiance, is pretty clear on this point: the divine call is chiefly heard as a moral and practical as opposed to a theoretical or purely cognitive one. God is, to be sure, often described as “the maker of heaven and earth”; but his exalted role as creator is *always linked to what he requires of humans morally*. The reality which the patriarchs and prophets of the Hebrew Bible and the key protagonists of the New Testament are made aware of is one that calls them to change their lives, to follow a certain path of righteousness, to hear the cry of the oppressed, to love one another, to forgive those who have wronged them, and so on through a long catalogue of luminous moral insights that form the living core of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.<sup>18</sup>

The primary domain of religious thought and language, in short, is the *practical domain of meaning and morality, not the theoretical domain of science or explanatory theory*. Jonathan Sacks, from whom I quoted earlier, draws attention to the fact that three of the most seminal thinkers of our modern intellectual culture, Einstein, Freud and Wittgenstein, all concur on this point. “To know an answer to the question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ means to be religious”, said Einstein; “the idea of life having a meaning stands or falls with the religious system,” said Freud; “to believe in God means to see that life has a meaning,” says Wittgenstein.<sup>19</sup> You may think that a triple *argumentum ad verecundiam*, appealing to three authorities in one sentence, is a bit much. But the agreement of the three intellectual giants in espousing a moral and hermeneutic rather than a theoretical and explanatory conception of God is nonetheless striking. Such a conception, moreover, has some interesting motivational implications. If the primary motivation for believing in God is that one finds the God hypothesis plausible, then a major factor in one's religious allegiance will be the thought that one is in possession of an intellectually satisfying explanatory theory. Should the God hypothesis lose its appeal in this respect, should one be able to say with Laplace *je n'ai pas besoin de cette hypothèse*, then the allegiance will be significantly undermined. By contrast, if the allegiance to God is based on my seeing that commitment to God gives my life meaning and value, then the stakes are rather different. My allegiance will be bound up with questions about salvation, transformation of life,

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<sup>18</sup> Similar calls, for compassion and self-purification, for example, are found in the Islamic scriptures. For an expansion of the point developed in this paragraph, see J. Cottingham, “Conversion, Self-discovery and Moral Change”, in I. Dalferth (ed.), *Conversion*. Claremont Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming).

<sup>19</sup> Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions* (New York: Dell, 1954), p. 11; Sigmund Freud *Civilization and its Discontents* [*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, 1929], Ch. 2 (PFL, Vol. 12, p. 263); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, 2nd edn, trans G. E. M. Anscombe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 74e, 8.7.16. All cited in Sacks, *Great Partnership*, pp. 204 & 318.

the ability to live with affirmation and hope—the questions that have always been at the heart of the religious life as traditionally conceived. It is in this context, I am suggesting, that we can most fruitfully approach the question of how knowledge of God might be available to human beings.

Such a perspective points us towards a different kind of religious epistemology—one that, rather than trying to make religious knowledge conform to a neutral, secular-style epistemic template, takes account of the special conditions under which God, if he exists, might be expected to manifest himself. The primary focus will be on the moral and practical context in which awareness of God can be expected to be generated, rather than on the context of abstract speculative or theoretical belief. Now the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition has often been conceived as Blaise Pascal underlined, as *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God: his purpose of entering into a free and loving relationship with his creatures would be thwarted were he to coerce their allegiance, so he can be expected (in Pascal's words) "to appear openly to those who seek him with all their heart, and hidden from those who shun him." It is entirely consistent with this that God should provide signs that offer, in Pascal's words, "enough light for those who desire to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition."<sup>20</sup> This crucially alters the epistemic rules that govern what we can expect by way of evidence in the case of God. Instead of evidence of the kind that is available to any objective and detached observer, one might expect the signs of God's existence to more closely related to God's salvific purposes.

This last point gives us a further reason for rejecting the idea that knowledge of God might be like technical or scientific knowledge, needing complicated and diligent investigational techniques in order to be disclosed. If the call to turn to God is primarily a moral and spiritual call, then given the basic premise of Abrahamic monotheism about a universally loving and compassionate God, one would *prima facie* expect the call to be able to be heard without special training or expertise or intellectual prowess. To put it in the Christian terms famously rehearsed by René Descartes in Part One of his *Discourse on the Method*, the kingdom of heaven must be "no less open to the most ignorant than to the most learned".<sup>21</sup> So one might conclude from this that knowledge of God cannot in principle be something complicated for humans to attain: rather, it seems one ought to expect that, like the divine mercy of which Portia spoke, it must drop "as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath".<sup>22</sup>

However, though not requiring complex inferential processes or learned scientific investigations, such knowledge need not be supposed to be quite as universal and freely available as the drops of rain which fall on all alike whether they like it or not. The Pascalian phrase just mentioned ("enough light for those who desire to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition") suggests that, instead of an unavoidable rain shower, a rather more apt simile for how awareness of God comes about might be the fleeting appearance of morning dew—certainly not something that needs complicated techniques to experience, but something that requires you to be interested enough to get up early in the morning and go out into the fields. A somewhat similar point has recently been put by Stephen Evans, who argues that we ought to expect knowledge of God to be both "widely accessible" (given the deity's benign purposes), but

<sup>20</sup> "Il y a assez de lumière pour ceux qui ne désirent que de voir, et assez d'obscurité pour ceux qui ont une disposition contraire." Pascal, *Pensées* [c. 1660], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1962), no. 149..

<sup>21</sup> "Le chemin [au ciel] n'en est pas moins ouvert au plus ignorants qu'aux plus doctes." René Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode* [1637], part i.

<sup>22</sup> "The quality of mercy is not strained. /It droppeth, as the gentle rain from heaven,/ upon the place beneath." William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* [c. 1597] Act IV, scene 1.

also “easily resistible” (as it ought to be if human freedom is to be respected).<sup>23</sup> What kind of knowledge might fit these conditions?

### 3. “Kardiatheology” and personal transformation

One answer to this question has been proposed by Paul Moser, in his two recent books *The Elusive God* and *The Evidence for God*, both of which display a marked scepticism about the value and appropriateness of traditional arguments for God offered by natural theology.<sup>24</sup> Moser rails against the demand made by “skeptics and philosophers” that God should provide us with what he calls “spectator evidence” of divine reality—the kind of evidence that can be gathered and evaluated by a detached impartial observer. Such a demand, argues Moser, misses what would be the main redemptive aim of the Jewish and Christian God, by allowing the topic of divine reality to become a matter for “casual speculative discussion”, and thereby in a certain sense trivializing it.<sup>25</sup> Moser offers instead a quite different model of theology, a *kardiatheology*, as he calls it, which is aimed “primarily at one’s motivational heart, including one’s will ...”<sup>26</sup> And this connects crucially with the question of evidence. Moser maintains that on any plausible understanding of the nature of a God worthy of worship, “divine self-revelation and its corresponding evidence ... would seek to transform humans *motivationally*, and not just intellectually, towards perfect love and its required volitional cooperation with God.” It follows from this, Moser argues, that the traditional methods and arguments of natural theology suffer from a “debilitating flaw”: they offer “no evidence whatever” of a living personal God who is worthy of worship and seeks fellowship with humans.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> “One thing we might expect, given God’s intentions for humans, is that the knowledge of God would be widely available, not difficult to gain. If we assume God cares about all humans, and that all of them are intended by God to enjoy a relationship with God, then it seems reasonable to believe that God would make it possible at least for very many humans to come to know his existence ... I shall call this the ‘Wide Accessibility Principle’.” C. Stephen Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). p.13. “According to [the “Easy Resistibility Principle”] ... knowledge of God is not forced on humans. Those who would not wish to love and serve God if they were aware of God’s reality [should] find it relatively easy to reject the idea that there is a God. To allow such people this option, it is necessary for God to make the evidence he provide for himself to be less than fully compelling. It might for instance, be the kind of evidence that requires interpretation, and include enough ambiguity that it can be interpreted in ore than one way.” Evans, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Moser, *The Elusive God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and *The Evidence for God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> For purposes of cognitively rational belief that God exists, skeptics and philosophers generally demand that God provide us with *spectator evidence* of divine reality. In doing so, they miss what would be the main redemptive ... aim of the Jewish and Christian God... Spectator evidence from God would allow God to be ... domesticated and taken for granted by us in our selfish ways, because it would lack corrective judgement toward us and our selfishness. Given spectator evidence, the topic of divine reality would readily become a matter for casual, speculative discussion, and would thereby be trivialized ... Opposing selfish human pride, authoritative divine evidence would work by *cognitive grace*, a free, unmerited gift from God, rather than by any human earning that supposedly obligated God to redeem a person or to give divine self-revelation to a person ... The God of perfectly authoritative evidence would therefore not fit well with the docile gods of the philosophers and natural theologians Moser, *Elusive God*, pp. 47-9; cf. p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Moser, *Evidence for God*, p. 26; cf. p. 253.

<sup>27</sup> Moser, *Evidence for God*, p. 158.

But what does “kardiatheology” yield in the way of evidence? Moser’s answer is that the evidence will take the form of *individual experience of divine transformative power*. That might suggest a very personal and subjective approach, bordering on fideism—an appeal to the need to trust oneself to the salvific power of God either without rational support, or even in the face of reason. But Moser is adamant that faith needs the support of reason—it needs to be “cognitively commendable”; and this in turn requires that there be a rational basis for commendation. Such a rational basis, according to Moser, can be found in the radical change *I myself* find myself undergoing as I open myself to the transforming Spirit of God. We are now a million miles from neutral, secular epistemology, both because the evidence invoked makes irreducible reference to the transforming Spirit of God, and also because it involves not some impersonally accessible body of data, but something that becomes, as Moser puts it, “salient to me, as I, myself, am increasingly willing to become such evidence—that is, evidence of God’s reality.”<sup>28</sup>

The epistemology implied here raises some interesting philosophical questions. Moser himself calls it a “grace-based” epistemology,<sup>29</sup> and this may lead some secular critics to dismiss the whole idea as question-begging, nothing more than an appeal to the unsubstantiated theistic claims of a cosy club of insiders. Certainly, such humanly experienced acquaintance with God’s call will hardly be accepted by all as a coercive argument for God’s existence, but it is not meant to be: Moser’s case, and it seems hard to gainsay, is that it can still validly function as evidence for a given person of God’s existence. Admittedly we are dealing here with what might be called “insider information”—reports in favour of a certain outlook coming from individuals caught up in a process that already implies being committed to that outlook, or at least being deeply receptive to the possibility of its truth. But so far from this being an unusual situation in human life, there are many parallels. Sigmund Freud, in citing the evidence supporting his psychoanalytic outlook, readily acknowledged that his evidence was not of a kind to satisfy normal scientific rules of procedure. The processes involved, he admitted, are not susceptible of public investigation under normal observer conditions, since the psychotherapeutic process takes place in a “private consulting room” and “only under the conditions of a special affective relationship to the physician”.<sup>30</sup> His underlying point is that the kinds of insight gained in therapy are not achieved via objective and detached scrutiny; on the contrary, the patient who maintains a sceptical and detached stance is already in a condition that tends to block the healing effects of the process, or even prevent it getting off the ground in the first place. Only by allowing oneself to be vulnerable and open to the images dredged up from the depths of the unconscious—a process which itself requires a certain openness to the terms of the “affective relationship” with the therapist—will the work of healing be able to make itself felt. The affective dimension, including the painfulness and the vulnerability, is quite simply part of the process; and the subject’s entering into such a state is a precondition for the confirmatory evidence to be manifested.

Some sceptics may be inclined to respond: “so much the worse for the epistemic status of the claims of psychoanalysis.” But whatever one feels about this particular example, it seems hard to deny that there are phenomena which are not such as to be apprehended under the standard scientific conditions for what counts as objective evidence, but which require receptivity by the subject, and possibly even internal transformation, in order to make themselves

<sup>28</sup> Moser, *Evidence for God*, p. 172.

<sup>29</sup> Moser, *Evidence for God*, p. 172.

<sup>30</sup> Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* [1920], Lecture I, trans. J. Riviere (New York: Washington Square Press, 1952), pp. 22-4.



manifest. If one does not like the psychoanalytic example, there are other more familiar instances. People speak of the transformative power of love, or of great music or poetry, yet the relevant evidence for such power is available only to *insiders*, those who find themselves undergoing radical change as the result of what they allow themselves to be exposed to.

There are, to be sure, some caveats here to be entered here, before we give a blank cheque to the claims of this kind of “insider evidence”. In the first place, we need to be clear what the evidence is supposed to be evidence *for*. Roger Scruton, describing the experience of a great work of music, speaks of “sacred” moment, moments “outside time, in which the deep loneliness and anxiety of the human condition is overcome”, and “the human world is suddenly irradiated from a point beyond it.”<sup>31</sup> Evidently one might accept his claim about the power of great music to produce the changes he describes without conceding that this is evidence for a transcendent source of change—something that irradiates the world “from a point beyond it”. So similarly, the personal and moral changes undergone by someone who believes they are opening themselves to God do not automatically guarantee that the source of those changes is the external transcendent source that the believer takes it to be. In the second place, evidence need not be *conclusive* evidence: there may be “defeaters”. So if I take certain spiritual transformations I myself undergo to be evidence for God (“personifying evidence”, as Moser puts it), this does not remove the need to consider possible counter-evidence for God’s existence (for instance, evidence arising from the problem of evil). Nevertheless, and notwithstanding these caveats, it seems reasonable to conclude from this part of our argument that there are certain areas or dimensions of reality, where the relevant evidence is available only to insiders in the form of the personal transformation they themselves experience.

#### 4. *Natural intimations of the transcendent*

How do our conclusions so far bear on the traditional theological claims concerning natural knowledge of God? Here I want to broaden the discussion beyond the specifics of Moser’s arguments by considering the more general approach to religious epistemology that they exemplify—what might be called the “Pascalian” approach. By this I mean an approach which emphasises evidence for God that arises not in the context of theoretical theological argument, but in the context of interior change and personal transformation—evidence, in short, of the kind that is by its very nature available only to insiders, in the sense of those who have undergone the relevant interior changes.

How, then, does this “Pascalian” epistemology bear on the question of natural knowledge of God? The Vatican Council document of 1870, quoted at the start of this paper, follows a long-standing distinction between on the one hand the “natural light” of human reason, and on the other supernatural revelation (for example the revelations reported in Scripture, or handed down via apostolic authority), which must be believed on faith. But if we start to think in terms of Pascalian epistemology, it seems clear that the kinds of phenomena it invokes don’t fit very well into the traditional dichotomy between faith and reason.

The stark dichotomy between “two sources of illumination”, as René Descartes put it (following a long Christian philosophical tradition)—the *lumen naturale*, or light of reason, and

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<sup>31</sup> Compare Roger Scruton, who, describing the experience of a great work of music, speaks of “sacred” moment, moments “outside time, in which the deep loneliness and anxiety of the human condition is overcome”, and “the human world is suddenly irradiated from a point beyond it.” Roger Scruton “The Sacred and the Human” [2010] <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/gifford/2010/the-sacred-and-the-human/> accessed 30 March 2010.

the *lumen supernaturale*, or light of faith,<sup>32</sup> suffers from the following problem: it suggests that *either* evidence has to be such as to be accessible by purely natural human secular reason, *or else* it has to be revelatory, and/or perceptible only to the eyes of faith. Aquinas's idea of faith "making up" for the deficiencies of the ordinary natural senses encapsulates this idea.<sup>33</sup> However, there is surely a *tertium quid*. Let us suppose, for example, that someone is not satisfied with the logic of the five ways; or let us suppose they find contemporary arguments for the "fine-tuning" of the universe insufficient to licence the inference of a cosmic intelligence at work; and suppose they have similar dissatisfactions with the other weapons of standard natural and/or science-based theology. Does it follow that to come to knowledge of God they are now dependent on the supernatural light, on faith and revelation?

The answer, I suggest, is no; and I want to close by drawing attention to some crucial aspects of our human experience that function, if you will, as a kind of bridge between what we can access through our natural human endowments, and what seems to depend on the gracious bestowal of something more extraordinary and special. Consider the "transcendent" moments that very many people will from time to time have experienced, the times when the drab, mundane pattern of our ordinary routines gives way to something vivid and radiant, and we seem to glimpse something of the beauty and significance of the world we inhabit. Wordsworth expressed it as follows, in a famous passage in *The Prelude*:

There are in our existence spots of time,  
That with distinct pre-eminence retain  
A renovating virtue, whence—depressed  
By false opinion and contentious thought,  
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,  
In trivial occupations, and the round  
Of ordinary intercourse—our minds  
Are nourished and invisibly repaired;  
A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,  
That penetrates, enables us to mount,  
When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.<sup>34</sup>

What "lifts us up" is the sense that our lives are not just a disorganized concatenation of contingent episodes, but that they are capable of fitting into a pattern of meaning, where

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<sup>32</sup> The clarity or transparency which can induce our will to give its assent is *of two kinds (duplex)*: the first comes from the natural light (*lumen naturale*), while the second comes from divine grace ... Those who read my books will not be able to suppose that I did not recognize this supernatural light (*lumen supernaturale*), since I expressly stated in the Fourth Meditation that it produces in our inmost thought a disposition to will, without lessening our freedom. René Descartes, *Meditations* [1641], Second Replies (AT VIII 148: CSM II 105-6). 'AT' refers to C. Adam & P. Tannery, *Œuvres de Descartes* (12 vols, revised edn, Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1964-76); 'CSM' refers to J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols I and II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>33</sup> From the hymn *Pange lingua* [1260]. Aquinas's position on the relation between faith and reason is not what is sometimes called a "fideist" one, that faith *substitutes* for reason; the two, rather, are complementary. Thomas elsewhere describes an "ascent" via natural reason, coupled with a "descent" from God via revealed truth: *Summa contra Gentiles* [1259-65], transl. A. C. Pegis (Notre Dame, Ill.: Notre Dame University Press, 1975), Bk IV, Ch. 1, and see Introduction to Vol. I, p. 39.

<sup>34</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 12, 208-218 [1805 edition].

responses of joy and thankfulness and compassion and love for our fellow creatures are intertwined; and where they make sense because they reflect a splendour and a richness that is not of our own making. Notice that this kind of “transfiguration” is not a “religious experience”, if that latter term is understood in the rather narrow way that has become common in our culture, when philosophers speak, for example, of the “argument from religious experience”. What is often meant under this latter heading is some kind of revelation which is taken to be evidence for, or to validate, the supposed truths of some particular creed or cult—a vision of the Virgin Mary, for example, or the sense (reported by one of William James’s correspondents) of “the close presence of a sort of might person.”<sup>35</sup> This kind of notion is I think uppermost in many people’s minds when they insist that they have never had a “religious experience”. By contrast, the kinds of “transcendent” experience described by Wordsworth and many other writers involve not so much a revelation of supernatural entities, but rather a heightening, an intensification, that transforms the way in which we experience the world. The term “transcendent” seems appropriate not in the sense of that there is necessarily an explicit invocation of metaphysical objects that transcend ordinary experience, but rather because the categories of our mundane life undergo a radical shift: there is a sudden irradiation that discloses a beauty and goodness, a meaning, that was before occluded.

Other examples could be drawn from the world of music, for instance as described in the work Roger Scruton which I mentioned earlier. Yet another example presents itself in the exercise of our human moral faculties. The Danish philosopher Knud Løgstrup speaks of the “ethical demand” in terms of trust and self-surrender that are a basic part of human life.<sup>36</sup> His particular focus is the openness and responsiveness to another person which is morally required in any human encounter or relationship. But a phenomenologically somewhat similar process occurs, it seems to me, in our responsiveness to central moral values. What philosophers have come to call “normativity” is one way of referring to a remarkable feature of moral values like the wrongness of cruelty, for example, or the goodness of compassion: such values exert a demand upon us, they call forth our allegiance, irrespective of our inclinations and desires. When we contemplate such properties, with the required combination of attentiveness yet receptivity, we transcend ourselves, as Pascal might have put it (I am thinking of his dictum *l’homme passe l’homme*—humanity transcends itself)<sup>37</sup>: we are taken beyond our own inclinations or endogenous attitudes to something higher and more authoritative. No matter what you or I may feel about cruelty—even if we develop a taste for it—it remains wrong, wrong in all possible worlds. And no matter how disinclined you or I may be to show compassion, the goodness of compassion retains its authority over us and demands our admiration and our compliance, whether we like it or not.

Now all these cases I have mentioned, our vivid awareness of natural beauty, our responses to the mysterious power of music, and our sense of awe before the authoritative demands of morality—all these may be described by the believer as revelations of the sacred, as intimations of the divine reality that is the source of all truth, beauty and goodness. But it is also striking that they do not necessarily present as supernatural or miraculous irruptions in to the natural world; they are in a way perfectly “natural”. They are not, to be sure, everyday or routine occurrences, since they characteristically raise us up to something higher than our mundane

<sup>35</sup> William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* [1902] (London: Fontana, 1960), Ch. 3, p. 75.

<sup>36</sup> Knud E. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand* [*Den Ethiske Fordring*, 1956] ed. H. Fink and A. MacIntyre (Notre Dame, Ill.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

<sup>37</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, (ed. Lafuma) no 131

habits and inclinations; but the relevant experiences depend on faculties and sensibilities that are an integral part of our human heritage. Except in tragic cases where these sensibilities have been irretrievably damaged by trauma or abuse or serious illness, such heightenings, or intensifications, transforming the way in which we experience the world, can come to all of us, from time to time, and if we honestly interrogate ourselves we are hard pressed to deny it.

I want to suggest that these experiences fall, simply and uncomplicatedly, into the category of awareness of God by means of the natural light. They are, if you like, natural intimations of the transcendent, glimpses of the sacred dimension that forms the ever present horizon of our natural human existence. I am, to be sure, here somewhat widening the traditional extension of the phrase “natural light”, since that is normally taken to be the natural light of *reason*: the terms *lumen naturale* and *lux rationis* are virtually interchangeable in many Christian writers.<sup>38</sup> But *that* I think is simply an instance of an intellectualist bias that is prevalent among many philosophers and theologians. If something can’t be turned into an argument or a logical intuition, then it is supposed to be not worth its salt—or else it is allowed because it is construed as something supernatural that, as Descartes put it, “whisks us up at a stroke to infallible faith”.<sup>39</sup> But the kinds of experience I have been speaking of are on the one hand not supernatural short cuts; yet on the other hand they are not exercises of our rational or inferential faculties, but something much more spontaneous and direct and intuitive. They are natural glimpses of the divine.

But even if they are not themselves arguments or intuitions of the intellect, can these glimpses at least be the *basis* for intellectual inference to God? Well, in a sense perhaps they can, in the following sense: since it is a rational requirement, a requirement of intellectual integrity, to take proper account of all aspects of our experience, any worldview that wantonly ignores, or fails properly to accommodate, these aspects of our experience is to that extent intellectually weakened in comparison with its theistic competitors. Yet in another sense I am inclined to say that construing such experiences as grist for an inferential mill would be a distortion. For if we take on board the lessons of Pascalian epistemology, we should see that there is not here a body of evidence from which there is a logical or probabilistic conclusion to be drawn by anyone who responsibly attends to the data. In the first place, no one can be compelled to have, or to acknowledge, such experiences: they require a certain kind of focused attention, a certain motivational stance which might best be described as a listening or attunement.<sup>40</sup> And in the

<sup>38</sup> The notion of *lux rationis* or “the light of reason”, found in the *Regulae* [c. 1628] (AT X 368: CSM I 14), becomes, in the *Meditations*, *lumen naturale*, “the natural light” (e.g. AT VII 40: CSM II 28).

<sup>39</sup> René Descartes, *Preface* to the 1647 French translation of the *Principles of Philosophy*, AT IXB 4: CSM II 181.

<sup>40</sup> Compare Heidegger’s term *Stimmung* (cf. *Being and Time* [*Sein und Zeit*, 1927], trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), H 137), as interpreted by George Steiner: “Metaphysical techniques of argument and systematization prevent us from “thinking the question of being”, from putting our thoughts into the vital register of interrogation (I use “register” to recall the notion of *Stimmung*, of tuning and accord between question and being)... [This] underlies Heidegger’s “counter-logic”, the peculiar design to replace the aggressive inquisitorial discourse of Aristotelian, Baconian and positivist investigation with an unresolved, even circuitous, nevertheless dynamic dialectic. In Aristotelian analysis, nature is made to bear witness; Bacon tells of putting natural phenomena on the rack so as to make them yield objective truths. In French *la question* signifies judicial torture. In Heidegger’s “questioning of being”, an activity so central that it defines, or should define, the human status of man, there is neither enforcement nor a programmatic thrust from inquisition to reply ... To question truly is to enter in t harmonic concordance with that which is being questioned. Far from being

second place, they are not “data” presented for our speculative assessment and inference. Rather, we ourselves are part of the evidence, as we open ourselves to something that is resistible, something that does not compel our assent, but which if we are responsive has the power to transform us not in such a way as to enhance our store of knowledge, or to allow us to make better inferences, but so as to irradiate our lives with meaning and value that we cannot create for ourselves.

In this sense, to come full circle back to the Pauline dictum with which we began, God’s power and divine nature are indeed manifest in what he has created—in the beauty and wonder of creation, in the glory of the works of music and art that celebrate that creation, and in the majesty of the moral law that inspires the human race, made in his image, with awe and longing. Nothing in logic or ordinary observation compels us to see things in such a transfigured light, so when such manifestations fail to occur, or for various reasons pass people by, or are interpreted in a sceptical or deflationary way, there is no point in issuing condemnations about their having “no excuse”.

And the context, in any case, is quite unlike that of ordinary human reasoning, scientific investigation, or speculative inquiry. In the very special character of our distinctive human responses to the transcendent there is always an implied call, a call to change, and to bring our weak and wasteful lives into closer harmony with the enduring source of being and value. The standard Christian view is that we cannot do that unaided, and that our salvation requires faith, and a voluntary act of openness to divine grace. But the special theology of faith and grace builds on the ordinary natural responses that are already at work in our experience of the natural and human world. So there is a link between the natural and the supernatural light, a bridge between the workings of nature and of grace, which together have the power to guide us home to our ultimate source and end. Or, if you will forgive me for allowing the last word to Wordsworth, this time from a different but equally famous poem, the *Intimations Ode*

Hence in a season of calm weather  
 Though inland far we be,  
 Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea  
 Which brought us hither.<sup>41</sup>

The “sight” that Wordsworth refers to is not “objective evidence”, but neither is it “insider knowledge”, restricted to the club of believers or the saved. It arises out of a pattern of response that is part of our ordinary natural human heritage: we only need to find the time to attune ourselves to it, and allow ourselves to glimpse its true meaning.

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initiator and sole master of the encounter, as Socrates, Descartes and the modern scientist-technologist so invariable are, the Heideggerian asker lays himself open that that which is being questioned and becomes the vulnerable locus, the permeable space of its disclosure.” Georg Steiner, Heidegger (London: Fontana, 2nd edn, 1992), p. 55.

<sup>41</sup> William Wordsworth, “Ode: Intimations of Immortality, from recollections of early childhood”, from *Collected Poems* [1815].