CHAPTER 12: GOD: CONCEPTS AND IMAGES

"Lo, my eye has seen all this,
my ear has heard and understood it."
"I will show you, hear me;
and what I have seen, I will declare."

(Job 13:11, 15:17)

It is finally time to talk about God. This chapter will certainly not be an exhaustive statement of all that can be said about God, however. For one thing, that can't be done in one chapter or even in one book. It can't be done by any one individual. Probably as a whole species we will never fully understand God, much less as individuals.

For another thing, it is not the purpose of this chapter to give a complete statement about God. The purpose of this chapter is to set out a general framework of what we can say. We will first look at those aspects of reality which can serve to point to God (Where do we see God?). We will then ask how God acts (What does God do?), and briefly address some questions about the nature of God (What is God like?). Finally, in the last section we will shift from concepts to images as I briefly suggest some metaphors that may help us to understand God.[1]

One further note of introduction: while it is appropriate to be cautious in making statements about God, we showed in the last chapter that it is *not* appropriate to limit ourselves to that which can be empirically or logically proven. So while we will not appeal to revelation, there are insights about God that have been developed through the ages, passed on by the great religions, and confirmed or maybe even originated in our

[1]While the approach taken in this chapter will speak of God being in the processes of this world, this is not "process theology" in a technical sense. Strictly speaking, "process thought" refers to philosophy or theology based on the ideas of Alfred North Whitehead. While process thought is congenial to my approach, I am not sure that I can subscribe to all of the claims it makes (such as those regarding purpose) and I see no advantage to exchanging Nicene jargon for Whiteheadian jargon (such as "concrescence" and "prehension" and "mental pole").

own lives. (As Christians, of course, we are guided first and foremost by the witness of the Christ.) We can put forth these insights as statements about God so long as we can show that they fit with reality and with our common sense.

I. Where Do We See God?

Q: If we are going to look for God—what does God look like?

A: God doesn't "look like". God doesn't look like anything, in the sense that God could be said to have shape and size and color like most things around us. We cannot see God just as we cannot see the wind and cannot see love. Yet we can usually tell by looking outside whether there is any wind. If we cannot see what the wind "looks like" we can still tell, by looking or feeling, its strength and direction. And if we know what to look for we can see the presence of love.

Q: How, then, do you see God? Where can you point to God even in the same way that you see the wind?

A: Someone of the "specific interventionist" line of thought might point to a particular incident and say, "There! *That* was God's doing!" Perhaps this is the kind of evidence you want. We can, after all, point to a blown-down tree and say, "There, that was the wind's doing." However—besides being a bit suspicious about which events get credited to God—I simply cannot believe in a specific interventionist God. Our common sense does not allow it, nor does our faith (see Chapter 3). So it is inappropriate to ask us for specific interventionist type of evidence. This means we *cannot* point to God by means of an incident here or there which somehow violates what we know of natural law.

Q: At what, then, do we look?

A: At the pattern. You could examine every single separate happening and phenomenon, human and natural, and in each separate case not see God. But this would be like someone who examined an exquisite fisherman's knit sweater and decided to find out what it is about the yarn that holds the sweater together and makes it so beautiful. They could then examine the yarn millimeter by millimeter, perhaps pulling the sweater apart in the process. They might learn much about the qualities of the yarn and wool. They might even conclude that they had learned all there was to learn about the sweater. But if all they looked at was the strand of wool in itself, they would never discover what holds the sweater together and what makes it beautiful. Unless you look at the pattern, at the way the yarn loops and ties and fastens, at the way the rows are related and at the intricate interconnections, you will never fathom the structure or the nature or the beauty of a sweater.

Q: That's fine for sweaters. But what pattern do we look at in the world?

A: There are four aspects of pattern.

The Pattern Part 1: The Fact of Pattern Itself

To begin with, look at the fact that there *is* pattern. Not just that there is something rather than nothing—although this is impressive in its own right—but that there is a whole range of particular somethings rather than just a great lot of nothing in particular. There is order rather than chaos, there are things—all sorts of things—rather than a big primordial blob.

"Nonsense," you may say. "That's just simple natural law in action, the unavoidable result of the laws of physics."

Perhaps it is. But was it unavoidable that the laws of physics should work just this way? Others have pointed out how an absurdly small change in any of a number of physical forces would yield a radically different universe. For instance, if the force that holds protons in an atomic nucleus were even slightly weaker or stronger, stars—and so also life as we know it—would be impossible.[2]

And is it so simple? The manner in which infinitesimal something-or-others—they are, after all, neither energy nor matter, or perhaps *both* energy *and* matter, whose behavior can be predicted only in probabilities—the manner in which they manage to join together in the proper sorts of atoms and molecules is, to me, a cause for wonder. A greater wonder yet is how these still infinitesimally small molecules make the great leap from aggregations of infinitesimals—however numerous—to solid, visible *things*. How do any number of atoms, which are mostly empty space, turn into tables and chairs and mountains and little green lizards? How do subatomic whatever-they-are acquire color and solidity and identity as a chair?

I am not suggesting that God turns subatomic particles into atoms and then into molecules and then into chairs, giving them color and hardness in the process. I believe I have at least a vague idea of how this works. But the point is this: there is an exceptionally useful and necessary set of patterns here which allows for infinitesimals to become "things" of a very different nature, bridging such an improbable gap that if we did not take it for granted we would not find it credible.

All I wish to say is this: I wonder if we ought to take this so cavalierly for granted.

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[2]See Freeman Dyson's essay "The Argument from Design" in *Disturbing the Universe* (Harper and Row, 1979). To be fair, also see Stephen Jay Gould's argument about drawing too strong a conclusion from this in "Mind and Supermind" in *The Flamingo's Smile* (W. W. Norton, 1985). (As we said, we are not dealing here with "proofs".)

The Pattern Part 2: Life and Consciousness

Look at this thing called life. Is this not a wonder? Is not the fact of life itself (not to mention its diversity, its beauty, its interrelatedness) a thing to marvel at?

There are some who would not agree. I do not mean those who would say that life's diversity, for instance, is a natural result of the process of evolution. I tend to agree, but it does not lessen the marvel for me. I refer here to the small group of scientists who argue that in fact there is no qualitative difference between living organisms and other chemical processes. They argue this on the basis that one can posit a series of intermediary steps leading from basic chemical reactions to what we call living organisms, which could be viewed as a simple chemical progression leading to the strategy of the cell.

But this is not a persuasive argument. To say that living organisms cannot be classified as different from other locales of chemical reactions because there are intermediate steps is like saying that animals ought not to be distinguished from plants because there are organisms that possess the features of both. However, while I cannot tell you whether protista are animal or vegetable or something else altogether, I can still distinguish a mammal from a conifer without pondering over it for too very long. And so can you.

Linguistic philosophy has long recognized that the existence of "borderline cases" does not argue against the existence of two genuinely separate classes. I do hope that no one believes that the presence of protista means that there aren't perfectly valid criteria for distinguishing plants from animals, petunias from porcupines. Similarly—and our common sense, modern philosophy, and the vast bulk of scientists are in agreement on this—while life and non-life both involve chemical reactions, life is qualitatively different in some very important ways.

And whether life represents the inevitable result of several billion years of chemical interactions on a planet such as ours, or whether it represents a one-in-a-trillion fluke, it is a source of wonder.

And among the living things of our world there are conscious beings. Descartes' famous utterance of "cogito ergo sum"—"I think, therefore I am"—is not nearly as important as the comment we can then make: "Because he thinks this, here is a conscious being."

Indeed, Descartes was a conscious being. I am a conscious being. I suspect that you are a conscious being as well. I not only feel, physically and emotionally, but I also think. And I am aware that I feel and think, and think about my feeling and thinking.

Life is a marvel in itself—and here is consciousness as well! We are, wonder of wonders, conscious beings.

I am *not* arguing that God gave us this consciousness by a special act or that this is what separates human beings from all other animals. In fact it is apparent that some other animals share a certain degree of self-

consciousness, most notably the great apes. (Might we notice this more in dolphins and whales if they were not so different from us that real communication is more difficult?)

Nor are we concerned here with the question of humanity's uniqueness in the universe. Whether or not there are other sentient creatures is an interesting question which—as of this writing—is unresolved. I expect it to remain that way for some time.[3] But this is irrelevant to our point here.

Our point here is that consciousness and the mind—something that is non-physical, that transcends the physical, that is wondrous in itself—somehow develops from physical processes. Please note: I am not saying that we don't know how the brain works. Though there is much yet to learn, we understand more and more each passing year. And I have no doubt that if you and I applied ourselves to the subject we could acquire at least a basic understanding of neurons and synapses and the like. And obviously the mind, and consciousness, depend upon the brain. But they are not reducible to the brain. Again, we see the bridging of an incomprehensible gap: electro-chemical impulses give rise to a mind and to consciousness. Physical occurrences somehow translate into a thinking, feeling, willing, acting being.

And again, we take this pattern for granted.

The Pattern Part 3: Ethics and Aesthetics

To talk about the leap from subatomic particles and probabilities to objects as we know them, and to talk about the leap from chemistry to consciousness, is in a very real sense to engage in metaphysics. Of a somewhat different nature are considerations of our ethical and aesthetic senses, of the fact that we can recognize right and wrong and perceive beauty.

Let us turn first to the ethical. There are voluminous studies on how we acquire moral reasoning. But about the only conclusions they can draw are that we acquire this by stages as we grow up and that development of our moral reasoning can be encouraged by the right sort of instruction and example.

What these studies have not answered—what cannot be answered by studies and perhaps cannot be answered at all—is why we have this

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[3] I find it interesting that those most familiar with the course of evolution on this planet—the paleontologists—are divided as to the likelihood of intelligent being evolving on other worlds, but are apparently united in the conviction that if intelligent life were to evolve elsewhere it would not resemble us. This is because of the immense number of circumstantial "accidents" over billions of years that form our particular path to consciousness (including, perhaps, periodic cometary bombardment of the earth and resulting extinctions). If this is correct, the strange creatures of science fiction movies, with two arms and two legs and a head, are far more like us than anything we are really likely to meet "out there". (See Stephen Jay Gould, *The Flamingo's Smile* [W. W. Norton and Co., 1983] pp. 403–413)

capacity in the first place. Remember, now, we are talking about our moral sense, *not* just about our ability to understand and comply with the rules of our society. Certainly our capacity to absorb the standards of our culture can be explained by psychology and sociology.

But we are not referring here to our ability to mimic our elders or to toe the line. Rather, we are referring here to our moral or ethical sense: our ability to recognize right and wrong, justice and injustice, even when inequity is socially acceptable and injustice is inherent in the existing structures.

Please note that we *recognize* what is right. This implies that there is *more* than our own subjective sense of right and wrong. Actions and situations are right or wrong in an objective sense, whether or not we have the ability to discern this. There is a right and a wrong. I'm not saying that it is always easy to figure out, although sometimes it is appallingly obvious. I am saying that it is always there, whether we can see it or not.

The conviction and drive of the great prophets did not come from their having devised a scheme of morality. It came from a sense of having discovered a truth so great and so powerful that it had to be shared. Some people, of course, feel this same way about "truths" that the rest of us find blatantly false and morally repugnant. The existence of fool's gold and the propensity of some people to be taken in by it do not, however, cast doubt on the existence of real gold, but rather on some people's faculties of discrimination. The fact that many people have value systems that do not appear particularly moral only increases the value and the marvel of good moral judgment.

You see, the wonder is not that we so often misidentify our society's standards with what is just and right, especially when it comes to those rules which favor our particular class or group. After all, these standards are inculcated in us on a daily basis in innumerable ways and are often reinforced by the heavy weight of self-interest. What is remarkable is the human capacity—in spite of this intensive societal indoctrination—to perceive where justice demands change, to discover that one's society or one's peers are morally wanting. We can recognize right and wrong, and we recognize that it is altogether independent of whatever may happen to be majority opinion at any given time or place.

Whence comes this moral capacity? And at the very least does it not make us aware of another level, another depth, of reality?

Then there is our aesthetic sense. You can explain why the sky is blue with reference to absorption and refraction and the length of light waves. Or you can explain why this wave-length looks blue to us with details about our retinas and optical nerves and brain processes. But how do you explain why this blue sky looks beautiful to us?

This faculty of ours is generally taken for granted and consequently overlooked, and the importance of beauty in our lives is greatly under-