

Mere Theism: The Case for God

by Mark Shea

Some time ago, my kids got a computer game called *Myst*. It's a very curious game — there are no instructions, no rules, and no commentary offered at the beginning. You find yourself plunked down into a strange environment on a mysterious island. You don't know where you are or why you're there. As you look around, you discover various things that were put there before you by some unseen intelligence. There are rocks, trees, buildings, books, and many other things, and each is invested with a mysterious, disjointed, and elusive significance. Push this button, and a map appears, but you don't know what it portrays. Open that door, and there's a strange machine that hums and "works" at the flip of a switch, but you have no idea what it does. You open various books, and the books tell fragments of stories, but you don't know what the stories are about. You go to different buildings and examine pieces of furniture and other objects. You know what they are, and you even know that they must mean something, but you have no idea what that meaning might be.

As you keep playing, you begin to discover connections between the strange paraphernalia you stumble upon. You find a book showing a piano keyboard and giving instructions to play a certain sequence of notes. Then you discover just such a keyboard elsewhere on the island. So, of course, you play the notes to see what happens. (I won't tell you in case you haven't played the game.)

As you can imagine, in such a mysterious world everything becomes charged with great significance. There's no telling what some seemingly trivial thing might signify, and there's the constant sense that you're moving in the precincts of a great mystery. You become increasingly convinced that there's some master key that can make sense of the connections between things in this world. And you come to realize that the connections—though mysterious—are not random.

In a curious way, what the Church calls "natural revelation" proceeds in a way similar to the game of *Myst*. We don't start out as adults with Bibles giving us a full set of instructions for the rules of the game, but as children with eyes, ears, noses, tongues, fingers, heads, and, especially, hearts. And through these portals come the first streams of light by which the "dawn from on high shall break upon us" (Luke 1:78).

It was the same in the childhood of the world. The earliest civilizations didn't have the benefit of a written revelation. God permitted most of humanity to muddle along for quite a while simply "feeling for him," as St. Paul said (Acts 17:27), on much the same basis as a non-Christian or a child today might do. He is not afraid to allow Himself to be revealed in the childhood of the world (and to the childlike heart today) through what He has made. And so, we come to know things about God first of all by looking around.

Some people are surprised to discover that the Bible itself teaches this. St. Paul tells us that God's primal revelation comes not through prophets or holy writings or mystical visions, but simply through the created stuff we see every day. "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Romans 1:19-20).

That is, God has made it possible to know that He exists, that He is almighty, and that He is Creator of all things, not by "blind faith" but just by looking around at things with an unprejudiced heart. It is well to understand this, for such "mere theism" revelation sets the stage for biblical revelation. So let us consider it briefly and note that the natural (as distinct from supernatural) evidence for God is presented to us every day in the form of two basic things: the physical world and the human person.

The Cause of All

Babies come from mothers and fathers, cars come from builders and engineers, and trees come from acorns. And though little children may simply rest content with that explanation, adults inevitably ask, "Where do the parents, builders, and acorns come from?" And so we find that everything participates in a "Great Chain of Being" back to the Big Bang itself. Absolutely nothing in Nature is unhooked from that chain. Everything in this universe is caused by something else in this universe that is caused by something else in this universe, and so on.

Our awareness of this is so fundamental that when something does break that Great Chain of Being (as, for instance, the miracle of the loaves and fishes does in John 6:1-14), we have to find an explanation for it by either saying, as Catholics do, that the God who exists outside nature added some links to the chain, or else we must say, as skeptics do, that it has some sort of natural cause (i.e., people sharing lunches or a big lie by the apostles who were yanking our Great Chain of Being).

The one thing nobody believes in is what philosopher Peter Kreeft calls the “Pop Theory” — that things like loaves and fish just pop into existence by themselves. They must have a cause, either natural (i.e., bakers and fish eggs) or supernatural (i.e., direct creation by God the Creator). Nothing in this world can cause itself to exist. Every created thing relies on some created thing ahead of it to pull it into being, just as a boxcar relies on the car ahead of it to pull it uphill.

Very well then, if existence is like a big train going uphill, we have to ask, “What is the engine?” We can’t say that there is some break in the chain — that some natural thing just popped itself into existence 15 billion years ago — just as we can’t say that loaves and fishes just popped themselves into existence 2,000 years ago. Hence, appeals to the Big Bang don’t explain away God. They just say that some unthinkable supernatural Power that is not the universe itself caused the universe to exist (because nature — like the tiny things that comprise it, such as the loaves and fishes — doesn’t have the power to make itself exist). Therefore, there must be some sort of Uncaused Cause beyond nature. And that, as St. Thomas says, is what everybody means by “God.” So from looking around, we can infer that God exists, just as St. Paul says.

The Invisible Designer

Likewise, from looking around, we can infer that God designs. So, for instance, when we see a microcomputer, we say, “The hand of a designer was here.” When we see the fathomlessly greater complexity of the human brain that made the microcomputer, we similarly respond, “The Hand of a Designer was here.”

A Christian man I know who worked at Boeing had this simple point confirmed recently when he e-mailed a diagram of the molecular “motor” that drives a paramecium flagella to some of the engineers in his department. Before doing so, he stripped off the description and the source of the diagram (Darwin’s Black Box, Michael Behe’s book on Intelligent Design and irreducible complexity). The result? Engineer after engineer wrote my friend back asking the musical question: “Who designed this?” They assumed it was some sort of nanotechnology being proposed by somebody in the company.

Of course they did. Why? Because when we see “specified complexity,” we very sensibly think “Intelligent Design.” Indeed, this tendency to connect specified complexity with an Intelligent Designer is so strong that one has to work extremely hard to brainwash oneself out of it. Some attempt to do this by repeating over and over that this is all just the “appearance of design.” Others solve the problem by appeals to visits by ancient astronauts who seeded the earth with life of their design (though this simply takes us back to the very Thomistic question: “Who designed the ancient astronauts?”).

But for people without such dogged faith in materialist dogma, the specified complexity and the vastness of creation betokens God’s “eternal power and deity,” as St. Paul says. This is exactly why most of the world has always been religious, not atheistic. Like any good Myst player, the average man, woman, and child can connect the dots. They’re not so arrogant as to suppose they know much about the mysterious Power that made the world. But neither are they such fools as to gaze upon a cosmos pregnant with such meaning, design, and sheer wonder and attribute it to nothing.

A Personal God and the Human Person

But, of course, being religious can mean almost anything. Indeed, based on the data we have looked at so far, many people can and do conclude that the power behind the universe is something impersonal, like the Force in Star Wars. Such a view of God (technically known as pantheism) is an ancient opinion that is particularly popular in the West these days because it’s a bit like a spiritual methadone treatment: It gives you the pleasures of religious faith without any of the troubling demands. In the words of C. S. Lewis, “An ‘impersonal God’ — well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness inside our own heads — better still. A formless life force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap — best of all.... The Pantheist’s God does nothing, demands nothing. He is there if you wish for Him, like a book on a shelf. He will not pursue you.” Pantheism essentially tells us that

God is identical with Creation. And, of course, if God is everything, then we're considerably relieved of the burden of having to choose between right and wrong.

The trouble with pantheism is that it tries to make God something "beyond personal" but instead winds up calling God something less than personal. Many people harbor in the back of their minds the notion they are being "truly spiritual" when they say, "We must get rid of the crude fancies of the puny human mind with its primitive agricultural images of shepherds, sheep, vineyards, and all the rest of it. We must instead thrust our spirits into contact with a realm beyond the imagination!" Usually, what this means in practice is abandoning older and more nourishing religious symbols for newer and more impoverished ones. It typically involves picturing God as an invisible gas or energy field, to cite enormously popular sci-fi imagery. And the explanation for this is simple: It's not that the energy field devotee has a higher religious consciousness. It's simply that he or she has — like most people in a technological society — known things like magnetism or electricity as their closest experiences of invisible power.

But the reality is that neither gas nor electric sparks nor magnets are terribly interesting conversationalists. A long chat with a magnet will yield few wise insights, whether we are pantheists or Christians. And this is our clue that we've made a wrong turn in shooting for something impersonal as the Ultimate Reality. For it turns out that we contemplate magnets and gases far more often than they contemplate us. In short, the average human being seems to have a much more vast and varied mind, heart, and soul than most magnets, gases, and electric sparks. And for this reason, we can say there exists something in this world that is more than mere "Creation," though it is certainly a creature as well.

That something is the human person, and every attempt to reduce humans to equality with mere nature is doomed to failure. Some who try to do so note, for instance, that humans share many common physical traits with the beasts — as though this made humans equal to beasts. The problem with this argument is that humans alone in all the cosmos are aware of and interested in the fact of our similarity with our fellow creatures. Not one other creature in the world recognizes it because not one other creature in the world is capable of reason as human beings are. Cats do not rhapsodize about their brotherhood with mice. Oak trees seldom hug environmentalists. And great apes do not concern themselves with tracing the evolutionary evidence of their common ancestry with us. These are purely human activities, conducted by human beings who, alone in the natural world, can see and reason about such matters — because only they are endowed with reason in the natural world.

Likewise, humans are distinguishable from all of natural Creation in their ability to see and create beauty. In the words of G. K. Chesterton, "Art is the signature of man." We do not find rough studies of a wildebeest swinging its head sketched in the dirt by chimpanzees. Those creatures biologically nearest to us in the great dynasties of the animal kingdom — the primates — are still so remotely different from us that there exists an unbridgeable chasm between our capacity to create and theirs. Such creativity and love of beauty doesn't square well with the attempt to claim that there's no real difference between humans and other creatures. It does, however, make a remarkable amount of sense in light of the biblical account of humans as somehow being made in the image of the God who creates. And so, looking not merely at Creation-in-general but at the strange creature called *Homo sapiens*, we can begin to glimpse not only that God is but that if man and woman are any reflection of Him, He may just be more like an artist than an energy field or a gas.

Morality and Justice

Looking at the human person shows us other things as well, particularly because we are human beings, not just "impartial observers" looking at human beings. When we see this, we begin to notice something besides creativity: namely, morality. Modern readers sniff at this word. If human beings are so moral, why do they act like such dirtbags so often? The problem, however, only highlights the central point. For though we complain strenuously that a man is evil if he dismembers and eats a child, we do not similarly complain if a crocodile does this. In both cases, the same thing happens, but in the former case, we recognize that the man is acting contrary to his true nature as a moral agent while in the latter case the crocodile is not a moral agent but simply a creature of instinct. The crocodile is not "to blame" as a man is to blame for his act. The moment we recognize this (and only those lobotomized by trendy philosophical fads do not recognize it), we see that there's a component to human makeup not present in other creatures: the awareness of justice. Indeed, the essence of the complaint against "dirtbags" is that they treat others not like people but like lesser created things. That is, they are unjust, and we know it.

And so we complain of the man who treats a woman like a "sex object" and not a person. We fault employers who treat their employees "like dogs" and not persons. And we rightly condemn the Nazis for butchering Jews and Slavs

“like animals” and not respecting them as persons. In all this, even human evil shows that humans are different from the rest of Creation and that it is wrong to treat them as simply unusually clever pieces of meat. Even when we do evil, we exhibit something new that cannot be seen by contemplating the rest of the created order. For the demand of conscience shows, both in the breach and the observance, that humans are aware of some higher demand enjoined upon them for justice.. When that demand is honored by human beings, they take care to respect and even love their neighbors in ways that could never occur to beasts. On the other hand, when they are determined to ignore this demand upon conscience, they create evils no animal would ever think to perpetrate. Our race is related to other creatures on this planet like a race of gods, Chesterton says, and “the fact is not lessened but emphasized because it can behave like a race of demons.”

Now it is nonsense to speak of human beings as “higher” than the rest of Creation or morally “better” or “worse” than one another if there is not some Standard of Highest and Best against which we are, either consciously or unconsciously, measuring them. If we say a Jew in a concentration camp should not be spoken of as a “bacillus” to be killed, we inevitably mean that his human dignity really does make him higher than a bacillus. If we say that Francis of Assisi was a better man than Heinrich Himmler, we are inevitably comparing both of them to Someone, not merely Something, who is Best. For to speak of being morally Best or “righteous” or “good” is to speak in personal terms. And this Best is, again, what everybody means by “God.”

The Evidence of Personal Experience

This fact that God is more, not less, personal than we are has implications for the way in which we argue for mere theism. For revelation is personal, not abstract. To illustrate, let me tell you about a woman I worked with about 15 years ago. We’ll call her Mary. Mary was diagnosed with diabetes and had to be hospitalized in Seattle. They got her insulin under control and kept her in the hospital for a day or so to make sure all was well. She was at that stage where she was well enough to be bored but not quite well enough to be released. As she was lying around in her bed one Sunday morning, listening to what she took to be a radio in the next room, she focused on the noise and realized she was listening to a Mass. Mary was an ex-Catholic, but having nothing else to do, she listened. She heard the readings, the homily, and the prayers of the faithful, including a prayer for the repose of Father So-and-So and, finally, a prayer for her own recovery — by name. Mary’s mother was associated with St. Martin’s College (a Benedictine school about 50 miles south of Seattle), so Mary figured she was hearing a Mass being broadcast from there.

The next day, Mary’s mom showed up for a visit, and she thanked her, saying she’d heard the Mass and appreciated the prayers. Mary’s mom was dumbfounded. The Mass had not been broadcast. They checked with the celebrant. Nope. No broadcast. Yet Mary was able to describe the homily, the prayers, everything. Now the funny thing was, Mary was very concerned that I not think she was crazy. Yet she remained an ex-Catholic, even after this. “If God really loved me, why do I have diabetes?” Mary said. I thought, “Sheesh, lady! Whaddaya want? An engraved invitation?”

All this confronts us with three things about arguments for the existence of God that I think we should pay attention to. First, such arguments are divisible into something like the distinction between public and private revelation. Public arguments such as First Cause or Design have been the understandable choice of most people who argue for theism since the most common and publicly accessible arguments are the ones that can reach the most people. If I see an angel, that does not constitute much of an argument for the existence of God or angels unless you know and trust me. But everybody can see the data and logic of St. Thomas’s Five Demonstrations of the Existence of God.

On the other hand, private encounters with the living God are not to be sneezed at. If you do know me and I make a claim to a miracle and show myself obviously to believe it, such evidence can constitute one of the most powerful arguments for theism. This personal aspect of revelation is important to grasp, because we are not, in fact, creatures who typically respond to mere theism. People seldom become worshipers of the Ground of Being. But people constantly become worshipers of the Living God.

Or, as Mary’s example shows, they don’t. And that brings us to our third point: Mere education and evidence is not enough. People can indeed follow St. Thomas’s chain of logic or have an experience like Mary’s and still refuse to accept what their reason tells them. All you need to be a mere theist is the sense God gave a goose. But the problem is that we’re not always able to have even that much sense. In the words of Pope Pius XII:

The human reason is, strictly speaking, truly capable by its own natural power and light of attaining to a true and certain knowledge of the one personal God, who watches over and controls the world by his providence, and of the natural law written on our hearts by the Creator; yet there are many obstacles which prevent reason from the effective and fruitful use of this inborn faculty. For the truths that concern the relations between God and man wholly transcend the visible order of things, and, if they are translated into human action and influence it, they call for self-surrender and abnegation. The human mind, in its turn, is hampered in the attaining of such truths, not only by the impact of the senses and the imagination, but also by disordered appetites which are the consequences of original sin. So it happens that men in such matters easily persuade themselves that what they would not like to be true is false or at least doubtful.

Thus, in the discovery of our capacity for sin, we necessarily discover the flaw in the “instrument” through which we look at God: namely, the cracked and dirty lens of our own fallen human existence. There’s something wrong with us, which is why we snort and complain about humans being “dirtbags” (and why we ourselves hang back reluctantly at the ominous words “self-surrender” and “abnegation”). We can see some things about God through this dim and damaged reflection of Him in our natural humanness, just as we can see some things reflected in a broken mirror. But there are other things about God that our own brokenness makes very confusing and hard to sort out (not to mention distasteful). Moreover, our status as creatures puts us in a very difficult situation if we wish to meet the Creator.

Here’s why: Suppose Hamlet is looking around at his world. He would discover much to indicate that there was some sort of Mind behind his world — some Shakespeare out there — but there would also be a great deal to confuse and baffle him about the nature and purpose of that Mind. If he wanted to, he could try to get to know that Mind better by puzzling about the order of the world it has created. He could wonder why certain things happen. He could guess from the fact that he’s able to speak beautifully that the Mind that made him must have something of Beauty about it as well. And he could discern a demand on him and everybody to be good and just.

We are to God as Hamlet is to Shakespeare. We can infer that God exists and that He’s more like a person than anything else we know. But we also suffer with having our world and ourselves as distorted by sin as Hamlet’s is. The mirror that should reflect Shakespeare clearly is broken and Hamlet cannot fully understand him based simply on reason and looking around at his environment. Moreover, Hamlet cannot, under any power of his own, leave his world to enter Shakespeare’s. So if Hamlet is to know a good bit more detail about Shakespeare — much less meet him — it is up to Shakespeare to make the first move and tell Hamlet about himself.

And that is why mere theist arguments — though an invaluable bedrock foundation on which to build the Temple of Faith — are not enough. Natural revelation requires supernatural revelation in our fallen world. And the Christian revelation is the story of how God provided exactly that. It is the tale of how God made a good world, how that world rebelled against Him, and how — in the call of Abraham and Israel, and supremely through the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of His Son, Jesus — He set about winning back a fallen humanity to participate in His divine nature after we threw away it all away. That Temple’s spires soar very high indeed. But the Temple never leaves its foundation.

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