

Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition

CONFLICT AND DIALOGUE

JACK MULDER, JR.

Indiana University Press
Bloomington & Indianapolis

CONTENTS

- Acknowledgments *xi*
- List of Abbreviations and Frequently Cited Works *xiii*
- Introduction *1*

PART 1 NATURE AND GRACE

- 1 Kierkegaard and Natural Reason:
A Catholic Encounter *13*
- 2 Is Abraham a Hero? The Natural Law and
a Problem in *Fear and Trembling* *37*
- 3 The Order of Love: The Love of Preference in
Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition *67*
- 4 The Catholic Moment? Apostolic Authority in
Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition *98*

PART 2 SIN, JUSTIFICATION, AND COMMUNITY

- 5 Must All Be Saved? A Kierkegaardian-Catholic
Response to Theological Universalism *125*
- 6 On Being Afraid of Hell: Kierkegaard and
Catholicism on Imperfect Contrition *153*

- 7 The Sickness unto Life: Justification in Kierkegaard
and the Question of Purgatory 178
- 8 Kierkegaard and the Communion of Saints 200
 - Conclusion 223
 - Notes 227
 - Bibliography 267
 - Index 277

ONE

Kierkegaard and Natural Reason: A Catholic Encounter

Many a man will live and die upon a dogma:
no man will be a martyr for a conclusion.

JOHN HENRY CARDINAL NEWMAN

For many people, if they know anything about Kierkegaard at all, they “know” that he is a fideist, or someone who relies entirely on the deliverances of faith for religious knowledge, often at the expense of reason itself. This charge, that Kierkegaard is a fideist, is a very common one.¹ Indeed, many have gone so far as to argue that Kierkegaard is an irrationalist and so concerned with passion at the expense of reason that, they surmise, there is virtually no positive role for reason to play in making the “leap of faith.”² Kierkegaard scholarship of recent years has been at very great pains to dismiss this charge, and it has achieved some success.

In the Catholic tradition, fideism is a heretical extreme of which so-called rationalism is the other pole.³ The one affirms that faith in authority is the only means of certainty (at least in regard to knowledge of the divine), and the other affirms that unaided human reason is the only means of certainty. Kierkegaard has, for the most part, been vindicated of the charge of outright, or at any rate irrational, fideism.⁴ However, for the Catholic tradition, his repudiation of natural theology generally keeps him too close to the extreme of fideism.⁵ Nevertheless,

John Paul II, while unlikely to embrace the full range of Kierkegaard's thought, identified him as a very profitable thinker for Catholics to consider. Accordingly, one prominent pope has, as it were, an official position on Kierkegaard's work: his work, while having widened the gap between faith and reason, nevertheless contains the kind of insight that "can lead to the discovery of truth's way."⁶ In this chapter, I examine this claim in the context of Kierkegaard's larger thought, to see just where exactly the disagreement between Kierkegaard and Catholicism on the question of "natural reason" appears to lie, and where the profit in his work may be found on this question.

The most obvious reason for reservations about Kierkegaard's work in the Catholic tradition is the anathema the First Vatican Council pronounced upon those who would deny natural theology, in a dogmatic constitution promulgated in 1870, just short of fifteen years after Kierkegaard's death. The canon simply reads, "If anyone shall have said that the one true God, our Creator and our Lord, cannot be known with certitude by those things which have been made, by the natural light of human reason, let him be anathema."⁷ Of course, as with most dogmatic pronouncements of this kind, this one hardly arrived without historical and theological precedent. As Linda Zagzebski notes, even contemporary Catholic epistemology, echoing influences roughly concurrent with or prior to the Reformation, tends to prize both natural theology and a certain kind of voluntarism, or choice, about one's beliefs.⁸

Although Kierkegaard is sometimes thought to be sympathetic to forms of voluntarism, C. Stephen Evans and others have done much fine work in showing that Kierkegaard is unjustly lampooned as an irrationalist and an irresponsible fideist. This has had the consequence of pulling Kierkegaard further away from the heresy of fideism, from the Catholic point of view. It also, however, raises the question that I will attempt an answer in the rest of this chapter: just how far apart are Kierkegaard and the Catholic tradition? I will begin by briefly discussing the attack on natural theology that often captures the attention of Kierkegaard's readers, and go on to discuss how the Catholic tradition has approached the matter of natural theology, taking care to see where and why Kierkegaard's position ultimately differs.

Kierkegaard's Attack on Natural Theology

As we shall see, Kierkegaard is no irrationalist. However, Kierkegaard's Lutheran heritage had a profound, if ambiguous, relationship to his thought, and Luther is not known for an appreciative approach to natural theology and natural reason, the latter of which he claims is "superstitious and ready to imagine."⁹ Perhaps one of the clearest verdicts we get from Luther on the value of reason is when he notes, in the *Table Talk*, that "prior to faith and a knowledge of God, reason is darkness, but in believers it's an excellent instrument. . . . As our body will rise [from the dead] glorified, so our reason is different in believers than it was before, for it doesn't fight against faith, but promotes it."¹⁰ The idea here seems to be that prior to an individual's acquisition of Christian faith, reason "fight[s] against faith," but when it is cleansed by Christian faith, reason becomes useful for the promotion of faith. This perspective makes sense in the light of Luther's generally dismissive attitude toward what scholasticism called "nature."¹¹ Luther seems to consider unredeemed "nature" as positively pernicious, rather than good or even neutral. Elements of this attitude can be glimpsed, and even in some cases intensified, in Kierkegaard's work,¹² and these facts may have helped to fuel his antipathy to "natural" theology.

While this chapter is concerned with Kierkegaard's attitude toward reason generally, its focus is more particularly on the matter of natural theology. The first task before us, then, is to provide an examination of some of Kierkegaard's salient views (or at any rate, those of his pseudonyms) on natural theology. The first place to turn is the pseudonymous writings, and especially those of Johannes Climacus. There, we find the traditional critique of natural theology in *Philosophical Fragments*.

In that work, Climacus gives a dilemma for the natural theologian. He writes:

If, namely, the god does not exist, then of course it is impossible to demonstrate it. But if he does exist, then it is foolishness to want to demonstrate it, since I, in the very moment the demonstration commences, would presuppose it not as doubtful—which a presupposition cannot be, inasmuch as it is a presupposition—but as decided, because otherwise I would not begin, easily perceiving that the whole thing would be impossible if he did not exist. (*PF*, 39)

Since Climacus is clearly right that it is impossible to (successfully) demonstrate the existence of a nonexistent entity, the only horn that concerns us from the above dilemma is the horn that tells us that if “the god” does exist, then it is “foolishness” to want to demonstrate it. Let us call this the “Foolishness Objection” (FO). What could Climacus mean here?

I think we can be aided somewhat in our attempt to understand the FO by considering what follows it. Climacus writes: “If, however, I interpret the expression ‘to demonstrate the existence of the god’ to mean that I want to demonstrate *that the unknown, which exists, is the god*, then I do not express myself very felicitously, for then I demonstrate nothing, least of all an existence, but I develop the definition of a concept” (PF, 39–40, italics mine). In this passage, Climacus argues that if we mean something else by “demonstrating” God’s existence, namely of moving from “the unknown” to “the god,” then this sort of “demonstration” will prove nothing. In that case, we are only proving that a given entity, whose existence is no longer being doubted, is in fact the theistic God. This will hardly convince doubtful parties of God’s existence. Let us call this the “Infelicity Objection” (IO). The FO and the IO, then, seem to be the two relevant objections to natural theology.

At this point, it will be helpful to consider William L. Rowe’s distinction between the two parts of a theistic argument for God’s existence, of which the first part is the effort “to prove the existence of a special sort of being.”¹³ The second part takes the efficacy of the first part for granted, moving from the existence of God to “the effort . . . to prove that the special sort of being whose existence has been established in the first part has, and must have, the features—perfect goodness, omnipotence, omniscience, and so on—which go together to make up the theistic idea of God.”¹⁴ That is, one would perhaps not think to bow down and worship, for instance, the first cause of the universe (even if proof for its existence were made manifest), but if the first cause were sufficiently (and successfully) delineated so as to resemble the theistic God, theistic devotion could enter into the picture.

Turning our attention back to Climacus, if we distinguish the two parts of theistic argument, it is not clear why the IO is especially serious, especially if the first part, that of demonstrating the existence of a special sort of being, were successful. That is, since it is the job of the second part

not to establish the truth of an existential claim, but to expound upon one that has already been established, the IO cannot mount an interesting and independent charge against theistic argument in general. Thus, the FO is the real issue in considering Climacus's criticism.

The FO contains Climacus's insistence that if we were to take God's existence to be doubtful, we would never "begin" with the argument. This is because natural theology, or at any rate that version of it of special interest to both Climacus and Catholicism, undertakes to demonstrate God's existence from God's works (or alternatively, God's "effects"). The reason that Climacus thinks we would never begin is that we would be using God's works (i.e., creation) to prove the existence of a Creator, but the argument would never get off the ground were it not to premise that the works in question are precisely *God's* works, which would not themselves exist without God. The situation, Climacus notes, is much as if we were going to try to prove the existence of Napoleon by premising that losing the battle of Waterloo was an (actual) action performed by none other than a historical personage named *Napoleon* (PF, 40). Climacus, however, recognizes that God's case is different than that of Napoleon's case, since "between the god and his works there is an absolute relation. . . . God's works, therefore, only the god can do" (PF, 41–42).

Nonetheless, the FO is more interesting than it looks at first. Climacus writes: "The works from which I want to demonstrate his existence do not immediately and directly exist, not at all. Or are the wisdom in nature and the goodness or wisdom in Governance right in front of our noses? Do we not encounter the most terrible spiritual trials here, and is it ever possible to be finished with all these trials?" (PF, 42).¹⁵ The idea here seems to be that in attempting to prove the existence of God using God's works, we will need to have it assured that they are indeed God's works, and thus that all of the creation is under the providential care of the theistic God. This is tantamount to supposing that the problem of evil is definitively solved before even attempting to marshal the evidence for God's existence. The lot of this arguer is not to be envied. The argument, however, is not only difficult; it is confused, according to Climacus. One is, in effect, taking the second, if you will, "thicker" conclusion of the theistic argument and using it as a premise to prove the first, and "thinner," conclusion of the theistic argument.

This critique may suffice for some versions of the teleological argument for the existence of God, or the argument from design, but Climacus nowhere restricts his attack on natural theology to the teleological argument.¹⁶ Rather, Climacus clearly means to cut short all efforts at demonstrating God's existence. Climacus's arguments are directed at the enterprise of natural theology in general, and the effort to demonstrate God's existence on the basis of God's works in particular.¹⁷ A good candidate for further consideration is the cosmological argument. Indeed, there are relevant differences between the cosmological and teleological arguments.

While I am not interested here in rendering a verdict on whether Climacus is correct with regard to all forms of the teleological argument, it is worth noticing that this style of argument may appear more likely to play into his hand than the cosmological argument. The reason for this is that the teleological argument begins immediately with considerations about God's having designed objects in the natural world for an end. Thus, Aquinas's fifth way "is taken from the *governance* of the world."¹⁸ Climacus is likely to argue that it is precisely the governance that is supposed to be noticed in the creation. But how does one recognize that things behave "designedly" unless one already supposes what the divine purpose might wish to accomplish? That is, perhaps we surmise that some events in the world transpire much as if they were purposed by a benevolent creator. This benevolence is then precisely what is in question when we arrive at the vexed problem of evil, which is especially troublesome when the traditional theistic understanding imputes benevolence on a maximal scale to the Creator. Climacus's worry here might be expressed by saying that he develops the suggestion that theistic arguments *themselves* conflate the two parts of theistic arguments, and that actually the first part cannot get off the ground without presupposing the soundness of the second part, which is simply to beg the question. With regard to the teleological argument, the suggestion deserves the sort of scrutiny I cannot give it here. But with regard to the cosmological argument, Climacus's suggestion may not be as plausible. My purpose in this chapter is not to mount or defend any single theistic argument. However, it is worth briefly noting one example of an argument that does not appear to commit the errors Climacus notes.

In the *Summa contra Gentiles*, Aquinas uses a cosmological style of argument to prove the existence of an unmoved mover. Using this procedure, Aquinas then argues that the required sort of unmoved mover must also be, among other things, eternal, purely active, immaterial, simple, and, finally, good.¹⁹ Climacus appears to allege that theistic arguments presuppose the goodness of the Creator so as to move from God's works to the conclusion that God exists. In the case of the cosmological argument, however, this objection may be more difficult to sustain. Without making the vaunted claim (a serious defense of which would require a wholly separate inquiry) that the cosmological argument itself is somehow on more secure footing than the teleological argument, we can notice that Aquinas's treatment of the latter purports to reason from the *governance* (one of Kierkegaard's favorite ways of referring to God) of the world to the conclusion that there is a God. Climacus's complaint is that one cannot speak of governance without a governor, and here we will need an intentional agent.²⁰ With regard to the cosmological argument, however, it is not so clear whether we will need an intentional agent when it is the phenomenon of motion that we are trying to explain. To establish the existence of a prime mover (or uncaused cause, or self-existent being, etc.) is, of course, the first part of the cosmological argument. The fact that the second part will then argue that the entity whose existence has been established must also be the theistic God need not affect the argument for the primary existential claim, namely, that an independent or self-existent being exists. Since Aquinas drew much of his inspiration for this argument from Aristotle, the resources for mounting this argument are as likely to be found in pagan antiquity as in a religiously loaded theistic metaphysic.²¹ For this reason, Climacus's critique of natural theology, as found in *Philosophical Fragments*, is, at best, incomplete.

When our topic is widened, however, to a concern over natural (though non-inferential) knowledge of God, independent of special revelation, Climacus receives the idea much more positively. While Climacus notes that "without risk, no faith, not even the Socratic faith," he nonetheless insists that Socratic faith is not faith in the strict sense (*CUP*, 210). He also insists that "Socrates did not have faith that the god existed" (*PF*, 87). Here it is important to contrast the belief in the eternal God's existence and the fact that the eternal God deigned to enter into

time in the incarnation. On this point, Kierkegaard writes, explicitly of *Fragments*, “I do not believe that God exists [*er til*, eternally is], but know it; whereas I *believe* that God has existed [*har været til*] (the historical)” (*JP*, 3:3085 / *SKP*, VI B 45). Socratic faith is an “analogue” to Christian faith because Socrates believes in the face of objective uncertainty, whereas Christian faith believes in the face of the “absurdity” of the incarnation (*CUP*, 205). How then is there risk, or objective uncertainty, for Socrates, if God’s existence is supposed to be the object of knowledge?

The idea here seems to be that the risk has to do with the source of the knowledge, for Climacus. There is objective uncertainty, precisely because scouring nature for evidence for God, *in the abstract*, generates a conflict between the evidence for wise governance and the evil present in the world (*CUP*, 203–204). This is the evidence available to a distanced and objective observer. But the individual who rubs the wonderful lamp of freedom with “ethical passion” finds that God comes into existence for her (*CUP*, 138).²² That is, the true and natural knowledge of God’s existence is obscured by one’s failure to relate to one’s own life with passion. Without this impediment, or rather by actively relating to one’s own life with passion, there is a natural (though again, non-inferential) knowledge of God, according to Climacus. He writes, “[God] is in the creation, everywhere in the creation, but he is not there directly, and only when the single individual turns inward into himself (consequently only in the inwardness of self-activity) does he become aware and capable of seeing God” (*CUP*, 243). That is, because God is not an object, but a subject, the individual has only a subjective way to knowledge of God, as opposed to an objective way.²³ Sin can thus provide an impediment to knowledge of God, but ethical passion can reopen the way to knowledge of God, independently of special revelation.

From the first critique in *Fragments*, we can see that Climacus appears to regard the effort to prove God’s existence using demonstrative and objective reason as at best irrelevant, and at worst pernicious. In particular, it can often distract one from the real existential claim that faith makes upon a Christian. The more one hangs one’s hat on a proof, the more one’s faith is simply a matter of intellect, which, as it turns out, Kierkegaard does not think is very secure as far as its ability to prove God’s existence is concerned. On the other hand, there is knowledge of

God available to human beings that we might fittingly call “natural” in that it can be acquired without special revelation.

In one of his journal entries, Kierkegaard writes:

To stand on one’s foot and prove the existence of God is altogether different from falling on one’s knees and thanking him. The former is a delicate silk ladder which one throws up like a romantic knight of cognition and somehow uses in a curious manner to get aloft, simultaneously securing the ladder while standing upon it (unlike firemen who enter each floor to secure the shinning rope)—the latter is a solid stairway, and even if one advances more slowly, he is on the way and all the more securely. (*JP*, 2:2279 / *SKP*, III A 145)

The idea here seems to be that the natural theologian is assigning himself a really impossible task, namely, to (rationally) secure the very edifice upon which he is constructing his faith. Faith has primarily to do with the will,²⁴ for Kierkegaard, and thus to construct one’s faith on the basis of an intellectual argument is ultimately inappropriate. Faith and demonstrative reasoning are the operations of, if you will, different organs of the person. The former is the one thing needful, and the latter does not help us acquire it, for Kierkegaard.

While I think that Climacus’s arguments against the attempt by natural theology to demonstrate God’s existence ultimately miss their mark, this does not mean that Kierkegaard and Climacus have nothing important to offer us in a related connection.²⁵ Rather, Climacus’s attack on natural theology is a narrow (if erroneous) instance of a wider (and ultimately correct, in my view) suspicion of reason’s capabilities in relation to faith. Having things reasoned out in a distanced and objective way can assure one of only so much, and cannot cancel the “pain and crisis of decision” (*CUP*, 129), as Climacus puts it. As Merold Westphal comments, “Far from providing support to faith, objectivism leads the individual to the place where faith is not even possible.”²⁶ This is an area where Kierkegaard and the Catholic tradition will likely disagree, since, as we shall see below, the Catholic tradition thinks that reason actually makes faith possible.

This way of approaching the matter, however, is not the whole truth. It is surely important for Catholics to approach Kierkegaard “with mind and heart rightly tuned,” but it is also important for Catholic thinkers and natural theologians to beware of distorting reason and removing it

from its theological moorings. On this point, Pope Benedict XVI writes that we have “cut ourselves off” from a kind of “primordial knowledge” and that “an increasing scientific know-how is preventing us from being aware of the fact of creation.”²⁷ Faith is at least partly a human act of will, for the Catholic tradition,²⁸ and this act of will can still be denied and even obscured in various ways, many of which have to do, as we shall have occasion to note later, with the presence of evil in the world. This is the reason for Climacus’s “most terrible spiritual trials.” This may suggest that the Climacian and Catholic notions of “objectivity” are relevantly different. For Climacus, the notion may be exaggerated by the conceits of the Hegelian system, and reliance on it may very well inhibit the possibility of faith.²⁹ We can now turn to the Catholic tradition to consider a version of its view of the promises of natural theology.

On Natural Theology and Epistemology in the Catholic Tradition

The *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith*, from which the canon anathematizing natural theology’s naysayers is taken, makes it clear that the Church regards its original source for this doctrine on natural theology to be none other than St. Paul in Romans 1:20. That passage reads, “Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made. As a result they have no excuse.” Thus, the point of natural theology seems to be that it provides a kind of “public” confirmation of the fact that humans should worship a God. In the aforementioned dogmatic constitution we read, “The same Holy Mother Church holds and teaches that God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certitude by the natural light of human reason from created things.”³⁰ Commenting on this passage, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* writes, “Without this capacity, man would not be able to welcome God’s revelation. Man has this capacity because he is created ‘in the image of God.’”³¹ Thus, another of the primary reasons that the Church defends natural theology is that it actually makes it possible for human beings to receive God’s revelation.

The Catholic Church thus claims that certainty can be achieved using natural reason about such matters as whether or not there is a God. Yet, the type of certainty that is being pleaded for is sometimes a bit

unclear. The *Catechism* notes, “Created in God’s image and called to know and love him, the person who seeks God discovers certain ways of coming to know him. These are also called proofs for the existence of God, not in the sense of proofs in the natural sciences, but rather in the sense of ‘converging and convincing arguments,’ which allow us to attain certainty about the truth.”³² A proof in the natural sciences, at least as they are often construed, would seem to be out of the question, since the natural sciences have as their subject precisely the physical world, and theology has as its subject the things of God that transcend the physical. The *Catechism* goes on to say that “the world, and man, attest that they contain within themselves neither their first principle nor their final end, but rather that they participate in Being itself, which alone is without origin or end.”³³ This is precisely the kind of reasoning that generates a cosmological argument for the existence of God.

For instance, consider Rowe’s famous formulation of the cosmological argument:

1. Every being (that exists or ever did exist) is either a dependent being or a self-existent being.
2. Not every being is a dependent being.

Therefore,

3. There exists a self-existent being.³⁴

Rowe goes on to argue that the celebrated Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) is “the fundamental principle” on which the premises of the cosmological argument rest, but that, in his view, we are simply unable to know the truth or falsity of PSR.³⁵ PSR, as Rowe lays it out, requires that, “*there must be an explanation (a) of the existence of any being and (b) of any positive fact whatever.*”³⁶ Rowe and the Catholic Church may part ways on the question of our knowledge of PSR, but Pope Pius XII appeared to insist, along with Rowe, on its importance, in particular, for natural theology.³⁷ In his encyclical *Humani Generis*, he wrote, “Indeed, this philosophy, recognized and accepted within the Church, protects the true and sincere value of human understanding, and constant metaphysical principles—namely, of *sufficient reason*, causality, and finality—and, finally, the acquisition of certain and immutable truth.”³⁸ Thus, while the relevance of such metaphysical principles is not primarily

what is under dispute, the fact of our knowledge of such metaphysical principles does appear to be a matter of dispute.

Curiously, however, the Church never appears to “legislate epistemology,” at least with regard to such metaphysical principles. We are thus left asking how we might come to know them. This is indeed a question that Rowe asks, but there might be some reason, in our current epistemological climate, to wonder whether he has adequately surveyed the epistemological options available to the theist. Rowe considers whether we might be able to know PSR intuitively, but dismisses the suggestion for the reason that able philosophers fail to apprehend its truth. At that point, he writes:

Here, perhaps, all that one can do is carefully reflect on what PSR says and form one’s own judgment on whether it is a fundamental truth about the way reality must be. And if after carefully reflecting on PSR it does strike one in that way, that person may well be rationally justified in taking it to be true and, having seen how it supports the premises of the Cosmological Argument, accepting the conclusion of that argument as true.³⁹

One might be quick to remind us that if Catholicism is in the picture, then we need to be discussing *certainty*, and not simply *rational justification*. Certainty is what Vatican I claimed for reason’s ability to know God.⁴⁰ But it is worth inquiring into just what we mean by the term “reason.”

Aquinas, for instance, has it that natural reason “begins from sense,” and thus, “can go as far as it can be led by sensible things.”⁴¹ That is, natural reason operates on the data given to us by the senses in such a way as to draw conclusions from it, given the sensible things, and the abstract principles that allow deduction from them. Aquinas does not, for instance, grant a serious hearing to a kind of Cartesian global skepticism, of the sort that would have me wondering whether $2+3=5$ on the basis of the far-fetched possibility that an evil genius might be manipulating my brain. On this point, Thomas Hibbs writes, “Aquinas would urge . . . that reasonable doubts are always local, never global; they are formulated against a set of background assumptions that could never all at once be successfully put in question. If doubt were to become truly global, it would be fatal.”⁴² Thus, natural reason does not begin, nor need it begin, where Descartes does in his *Meditations*, in the search for

indubitable truths in the face of global skepticism. Rather, Aquinas tells us that natural reason “contains two things: images derived from the sensible objects; and the natural intelligible light, enabling us to abstract from them intelligible conceptions.”⁴³ What this means is that Aquinas’s conception of knowledge already assumes that certain capabilities (among them the hotly contested power of abstraction) are in place, and, to a certain extent, functioning properly.

To employ this sort of account, one might include a number of principles that are necessary *before* conducting the kinds of demonstrations that Aquinas saw as paradigms of *scientia*, or demonstrative knowledge, as propositions apprehended by the natural light in a non-inferential way. John I. Jenkins writes, “Presented with certain *phantasmata*, one spontaneously forms an idea in the intellect’s first operation, and in the second operation the intellect is moved to make a non-inferential judgment. Such judgments are justified as basic.”⁴⁴ To say that these judgments are basic is to say that they have the right sort of positive epistemic status; the right sort of warrant that, if the belief is also true, could certify it as known, even if the belief has such warrant without being inferred from other beliefs, and even if the subject is not aware that each of the conditions for its having this kind of warrant are met.⁴⁵ Jenkins makes it explicit that principles of the sciences, in the mold of Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, are the objects of this basic knowledge. It seems to me, however, that Jenkins’s account suggests that Pius XII’s “constant metaphysical principles,” among them that of sufficient reason, might well also be included in the kinds of judgments that, on Jenkins’s account, the Angelic Doctor might deem basic.⁴⁶ We thus might be able to construct an authentically Catholic hybrid of natural theology and basic beliefs.⁴⁷

Accounts of basic beliefs are often objected to because they simply absorb claims with prominent objectors into a privileged and sacrosanct set, thereby relieving the believer of any obligation to provide reasons for her belief in these claims. In answer to this charge, the defender of this brand of Catholic epistemology can reply that what is claimed to be basic is not a privileged proposition available only to partisans of Catholic Christian truth, but rather a set of metaphysical principles that are constantly assumed by many, from respected philosophic voices in pagan antiquity to crime scene investigators.⁴⁸ One might object to

this that the reason that our knowledge of the principle is justified, or warranted as basic, is that God intends for our faculties to deliver these true beliefs to us. This seems to reduce to the claim that we *know* the universe is ordered because it *is* ordered (and theistically ordered at that), and this seems circular. In response, I would claim that the circularity is not vicious. For the circularity to be vicious, it ought to use as a premise the very thing it intends to prove. It is not doing that; it is simply taking advantage of the penchant people have for believing that events and facts have explanations and exploiting this to show that this overarching general principle entails the existence of a self-existent Being. Is this a moderating of the Church's position? Perhaps it is, but only because we live in an epistemological environment where global skepticism has entered into the fray. Post-Cartesian radical doubters were never Aquinas's audience. Aquinas never took global skepticism seriously, and did not think he needed a direct response to it. I think there is little reason to believe that the dogmatic documents of the Church take global skepticism any more seriously than Aquinas did.

Thus, the view we are examining here would hold that God's existence can indeed be known with certainty, and by no other capacity than natural reason, but that it is precisely natural reason that would infer God's existence on the basis of foundational principles that are not themselves inferred. In this context, it means something to call reason "natural." It means that it is ordinary and natural for humans to correctly believe that certain principles are in fact true, which they constantly take for granted in their everyday lives and only venture to call into question when the conversation shifts to abstruse philosophical discussion. Thus, one might undertake Rowe's suggested introspection, and find that PSR just does seem compelling. We must, however, leave open the possibility that one could *know* (and not just be rationally justified in believing) PSR just because one is, in effect, *designed* to know PSR. Perhaps one is also aware that from PSR (and the contingency of created things) one can infer the existence of a self-existent being, and perhaps also knows of arguments that might convince her that this self-existent being is the theistic God. If so, these beliefs might then qualify as certain knowledge if the foundational beliefs are known, and the inferential relations are clear. All of this appears to be consistent with what the Church wants to claim, namely, that nonsectarian (but nonetheless natural and hu-

man) reason can make a powerful contribution to belief in God, but that reason might first need to exorcise itself of any skeptical worries about, among other things, evil demons and brains in vats.

Basic Belief in God in Kierkegaard and Catholic Theology

Thus far we have discussed how knowledge of PSR could be basic. In this section, we will consider a different, but related, question, namely, whether and how a belief in God's existence might also be basic. To claim that belief in God is basic is a tenet typically associated with Reformed Epistemology, and has often been taken to distinguish the latter from Catholic views.⁴⁹ Recently, however, Stephen R. Grimm has argued that Cardinal Newman's epistemological views are substantially in harmony with those of Reformed Epistemology.⁵⁰ Newman, for instance, takes the case of a child (he supposes the age of five or six), who forms his belief in God through the development of his awareness of a moral governor without inferring it from other beliefs.⁵¹ There is an interesting comparison to be made here with Kierkegaard, especially with his pseudonym Judge William's account of his childhood. In *Either/Or*, part 2, Judge William describes the way his first homework assignment (at age five) inculcated within him a sense of duty, and that this eternal duty was a proof of the immortality of his soul (*EO*, vol. 2, 270). Now, it is certainly true that Newman's views on conscience are thought to be a clue to our awareness of God's existence, whereas Judge William draws this out more explicitly to the immortality of the soul. However, the similarities on this point suggest that Kierkegaard can countenance an awareness of God and the eternal even in the natural human being.

When we shift our focus more squarely to the question of a basic knowledge of God, we must notice that Kierkegaard, in his own journals, writes, in 1848, "I cannot get away from the thought I have had from the beginning: does not every man in his quiet mind think about God" (*JP*, 6:6158 / *SKP*, IX A 55). It is also significant that in a draft for *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard has Climacus say, "Just as no one has ever proved it [i.e., God's existence], so there has never been an atheist, even though there certainly have been many who have been unwilling to let what they knew (that the God [*Guden*] exists) get control of their minds" (*JP*, 3:3606 / *SKP*, V B 40:11).⁵² Thus, although Kierkegaard does

not appear to endorse the soundness of a proof for God's existence in the ordinary sense, he cannot quite pull himself (or even the pseudonym most opposed to arguments for God's existence) away from the idea that humans might have some kind of fundamental knowledge of God, whether they recognize it explicitly or not.

This line of thought has many distinguished proponents. For our purposes here, let us consider briefly the contributions of two, namely, the Reformed philosopher Alvin Plantinga and the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner. One of Plantinga's major contributions has been his development of what he has called the "Aquinas/Calvin Model" of basic belief in God for human beings.⁵³ According to this model, we human beings naturally have implanted within us (by God) a tendency to form true beliefs about God. Plantinga, following Calvin, calls this the *sensus divinitatis*. He writes, "The *sensus divinitatis* is a disposition or set of dispositions to form theistic beliefs in various circumstances, in response to the sorts of conditions or stimuli that trigger the working of this sense of divinity."⁵⁴ However, a difference between Plantinga and the Catholic natural theological tradition here is that Plantinga does not think that this natural knowledge is arrived at by an inferential process. In fact, he even argues against a natural theological interpretation of Romans 1:20, suggesting that it aligns more neatly with his *sensus divinitatis* than with natural theology.⁵⁵ What, then, is the difference between natural theology and the *sensus divinitatis* on this score? The answer has to do with how the theistic beliefs are formed. Plantinga writes, "Upon the perception of the night sky or the mountain vista or the tiny flower, these beliefs just arise in us. They are *occasioned* by the circumstances; they are not conclusions from them. The heavens declare the glory of God and the skies proclaim the work of his hands: but not by way of serving as premises for an argument."⁵⁶

While Plantinga is here distancing himself from natural theology in the ordinary sense, it is worth noting that many Catholic theologians find a similar, though not necessarily identical, way of talking about the knowledge of God to be attractive. Plantinga's Aquinas/Calvin model is intended to be a rather broad presentation of non-inferential ways of naturally knowing God. It is broad enough to encompass the idea that God's presence is understood by the subject to be exterior or interior. One aspect of Aquinas's work that may be fruitful in a slightly narrower

way, however, argues that “the light of natural reason itself is a participation of the divine light.”⁵⁷ This suggestion in Aquinas, further developed by Karl Rahner, proposes that if external circumstances “trigger” a *natural* awareness of God, we should nonetheless understand God’s presence as interior, rather than exterior, and in some sense phenomenologically prior to our own act of understanding these ordinary perceptual stimuli. Both are non-inferential modes of knowing God, but Rahner’s method suggests a particular specification of a broader Aquinas/Calvin model.

Rahner made an especially memorable mark on theology in his doctrine of the “anonymous Christian,” which is often cited in discussions of religious inclusivism.⁵⁸ However, he also believed in what he called an “unthematic and anonymous” knowledge of God.⁵⁹ This “transcendental” knowledge was said by Rahner to be co-present with every act of knowledge, because it was different from and necessary for an individual apprehension of any single object of knowledge.⁶⁰ This is why Rahner writes, “All clear understanding is grounded in the darkness of God.”⁶¹ Rahner even claims that this transcendental knowledge “has to be called a posteriori insofar as every transcendental experience is mediated by a categorical encounter with concrete reality in our world, both the world of things and the world of persons.”⁶² While never directly repudiating the traditional “proofs” for God’s existence, Rahner insists that a posteriori proofs should not be “misunderstood in the sense that God could simply be indoctrinated from without as an object of our knowledge.”⁶³

Thus, while Rahner does not wish to impugn the a posteriori character of the natural knowledge of God, he appears to want to insist that natural knowledge is never identical with what we might call *purely secular knowledge* (which is ultimately a chimera). That is, even our “natural” experience is already saturated with the presence of God, and while Rahner himself constantly points out that we can deny, or “suppress,” this,⁶⁴ we nevertheless always have this primordial awareness as a part of our very being, especially as prior to, and necessary for, any act of understanding.

Despite his clear disavowal of natural theology (in contrast to Rahner’s measured and somewhat tepid reception), Kierkegaard would likely approve of much of what Rahner has said in connection with a transcendental knowledge of God. As early as 1838, he wrote:

Developing a priori basic concepts is like prayer in the Chr. sphere, for one would think that here man placed himself in relation to the Deity in the freest, most subjective way; and yet we are told that it is the Holy Spirit that effects prayer, so that the only prayer left to us would be to be able to pray, although upon closer inspection even this has been effected in us—similarly there is no deductive development of concepts, or whatever one wants to call that which has some constitutive power—man can only call it to mind, and willing this, if this willing is not an empty, unproductive gaping, is what corresponds to this single prayer and, just like it, is effected in us. (*JN*, 1:261 / *DD*: 176)

In the margin for this entry, Kierkegaard also notes, “One can therefore also say that all knowing is like the drawing of breath, a *respiratio*.” (*JN*, 1:261 / *DD*: 176.a). The point of these entries, though not easy to discern, seems to be that, in the Christian sphere, one would think that one could simply pray to God, much in the same way that one would lay his entreaties before a king. However, it is not like this, since the Spirit effects prayer, and indeed makes us capable of it. In a similar way, our concepts and our understanding are not the job of our autonomous deductive reason, but rather, all our knowing is connected with the Holy Spirit, who makes each knowing act possible.

What the foregoing has shown is that while atheists can come to knowledge of a great many things, ultimately the atheist’s project is unworkable, for both Kierkegaard and Catholicism. This is because even our ability to grasp truths that are not strictly religious or supernatural is already overrun with God’s active presence. Perhaps this means that Climacus is partly right in his attack on natural theology in that we do already know, in some sense, the existence of God prior to proving it. However, the sense in which we know God’s existence prior to its proof is the sense in which we are all aware of God’s existence in our innermost being, and yet there are significant impediments, having to do with the reign of sin in our lives, that can hamper our ability to make this knowledge explicit. Natural reason can make us aware of God’s existence using faculties generally available to all rational beings. As a result, according to Paul, we have “no excuse.” Our sinful tendency to attempt to live without God is checked by our ability to discern clear signs of God’s existence, whether that be through Newman’s route of conscience (where a significant parallel exists in Kierkegaard’s writings), Plantinga’s basic beliefs, Rahner’s transcendental knowledge, or more traditional demon-

strative evidence. No doubt this is why the *Catechism* tells us that this natural knowledge enables us to receive God's revelation.⁶⁵

My view here comes to this: natural theology is helpful and available, but this does not mean that we have demonstrative knowledge of the principles that undergird the premises of the traditional arguments for God's existence. Some of these principles, such as PSR, can be had by way of a more basic, non-inferential knowledge that has everything to do with the proper functioning of our cognitive faculties in the right sort of environment. As it happens, strong similarities between Kierkegaard and Plantinga along the lines of properly basic belief in God have already been shown.⁶⁶ If Kierkegaard is a proper functionalist of sorts, we might ask ourselves whether Kierkegaard would find some basic metaphysical principles, such as PSR, to be properly basic. If so, what would prevent him from endorsing the cosmological argument?

In addition, there are even parallels (or at any rate, analogues) in the Catholic tradition along the lines of a properly basic belief in God to be glimpsed in Newman and in Rahner. Properly basic knowledge of metaphysical principles (such as PSR) and properly basic knowledge of God are certainly distinct, but they are related. While the Catholic tradition is somewhat more reticent to believe that the claims of faith per se are properly basic,⁶⁷ and I share this reticence, there is still much that Kierkegaard and Catholicism have in common with respect to the epistemological underpinnings of theistic belief. In the following section, I will briefly consider the consequences of sin and just how much it is said to dull our epistemic faculties.

The Consequences of Sin in Kierkegaard and Catholicism

In this brief section I want to discuss how Kierkegaard and the Catholic tradition can both give accounts of the deleterious consequences of sin for natural knowledge of God without the need to deny natural knowledge altogether or implausibly claim that all atheism is culpable. To do this we need to briefly consider the pseudonym Anti-Climacus's claims about sin in *The Sickness unto Death*.

Anti-Climacus contrasts Socrates' view of sin with the "Christian" view of sin. The difference is taken to be that Socrates believes that sin is most deeply rooted in ignorance, and thus, "The Socratic principle works

out in the following way. When someone does not do what is right, then neither has he understood what is right” (*SUD*, 92). By contrast, what Anti-Climacus is pleased to call the Christian view of sin insists that “sin is not a matter of a person’s not having understood what is right but of his being unwilling to understand it, of his not willing what is right” (*SUD*, 95). For Anti-Climacus, the reason for this refusal to will to understand the truth, this lying to oneself, is that the individual is in despair. Thus, one way to account for the origin of atheism in Kierkegaard’s work is that the reason for the phenomenon of atheism is that people are sinful and that they defiantly refuse to recognize the truth of God’s existence and thus their creaturely dependence upon God.

While I see no need for a Christian or theist to deny that this possibility exists, it is highly implausible if interpreted as the *only* explanation for the phenomenon of atheism (even from a theistic point of view) for the very good reason that many atheists are honestly persuaded of the truth of their position and seem not to be numbered among the world’s gravest sinners. On the other hand, the reason for the Catholic insistence on the competence of reason, and thus the availability of natural theology in the first place, was rooted in Paul’s claim that, because all can come to know God, all are left with “no excuse.” How can we resolve this issue?

There are two things that I think are important to note here. First, while the route of natural theology is considered to be generally available, Aquinas, for instance, makes it clear that there exists a “common and confused knowledge of God” which is found, he thinks, in practically everyone.⁶⁸ This “common and confused” knowledge is said to arise from observing nature’s order, but it does not entail knowledge of the “orderer’s” attributes, or indeed of whether there is only *one* “orderer.”⁶⁹ This type of natural knowledge does not depend upon an especially acute demonstrative intellect (and so is available to the greater mass of uneducated people), but it also has fewer payoffs for that reason. Notice here that, while *monotheism* is within the scope of natural theology, it may be partially hidden without an intellect suited for demonstrative proofs.

This, claim, however, would seem to only accentuate the problem. After all, is not Vittorio Messori right, in his question to John Paul II, when he claims that it is precisely atheism that has often been confined to the “*elite* and intellectuals?”⁷⁰ If so, this would seem to be a coun-

terexample to the claim that everyday people possess a “common and confused” knowledge of God, but that intellectuals possess a finer and more sophisticated knowledge of God.⁷¹ For this reason, we must turn to investigate the consequences of sin. We have already noticed Anti-Climacus saying that sinful humans can (culpably) deny their own knowledge of God and other Christian truths. But, under the assumption that natural knowledge of God is available, can atheists deny God’s existence without being culpable for this denial?

One way to respond to this is to use a Kierkegaardian tack helpfully articulated by Evans. Evans uses 1 Samuel 3 to demonstrate how it is possible to have an encounter with God without knowing that it is God whom one encounters.⁷² In that episode, Samuel is being called by God’s voice, but Samuel does not learn that it might indeed be God’s voice until Eli the priest instructs him. Evans goes on to argue that an atheist might well have an encounter with God through the experience of moral conduct. Just as Newman argued that conscience provided a way for awareness of God, Evans sees Kierkegaard as arguing for something similar, and in a way that might permit atheists to have this awareness. Evans writes, “If they are truly responsive to the voice of conscience and truly seek the Good, then they may in fact be in a situation analogous to Kierkegaard’s pagan:⁷³ someone who has more truth in his or her life than another person who may assent to true propositions about God but who does not truly respond to God’s call as that call manifests itself through conscience.”⁷⁴

One might compare this claim with Vatican II’s own statement on the possibility of salvation for those outside the readily visible confines of the Catholic Church. In *Lumen Gentium*, we read:

Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life.⁷⁵

I think there would be one significant difference between the view of Catholicism and the view Evans is articulating as Kierkegaardian here. I think Evans is right to think that, for Kierkegaard, even a non-theist

could encounter God *in* the moral life of Kierkegaard's ethical sphere without recognizing God therein. Where I think there is a difference between Kierkegaard and Catholicism on this point is that Kierkegaard would hold that *fulfilling* the moral requirement would be to obey the divine command to love the neighbor, which Kierkegaard takes to be a revelation (*WL*, 44).⁷⁶ Even if the atheist can fulfill this obligation without knowing God as its origin, the knowledge of the requirement would not be natural knowledge. For Catholicism, natural knowledge, as we will see in the next chapter, can make us aware of particular ethical requirements that can be fulfilled without the special grace of Christian charity. Fulfillment simply of the natural law does not save a person for Catholicism, though, and so perhaps there is an implicit faith also being referenced.⁷⁷ These facts might explain how someone could be entering into a relationship with God as an atheist, but the question that remains is how does our individual obtain the false belief that there is no God without culpability?

On this point, we might consider the phenomenon of social sin. In his apostolic exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, John Paul II described one important aspect of this phenomenon. He writes:

To speak of social sin means in the first place to recognize that, by virtue of human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete, each individual's sin in some way affects others. Consequently one can speak of a communion of sin, whereby a soul that lowers itself through sin drags down with itself the church and, in some way, the whole world. . . . With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family.⁷⁸

In this way, sin always drags down the world by its very nature. In fact, as we saw earlier, Benedict XVI argues that, presumably through sin, we have cut ourselves off from a primordial understanding of creation. Benedict appeared to be insisting that the kind of scientific methodology that comes with an a priori prejudice against God is a sinful mentality into which it is too easy to get caught up.⁷⁹ Thus, we can certainly find, in the Catholic tradition, an insistence that personal sin has social effects, and there is no reason to restrict these effects to the individuals who perpetrated the sin, where original sin is the obvious paradigm case.⁸⁰ These social effects can also have epistemic repercussions.

The epistemic repercussions that social sin can have can obscure the natural knowledge that might ordinarily come much easier.⁸¹ John Paul II discusses an example of this in connection with Gandhi and specifically Christian knowledge. He notes that, for many, the negative connotations that are associated with life in Western society “present a considerable obstacle to the acceptance of the Gospel.” Of Gandhi, he asks, “Could a man who fought for the liberation of his great nation from colonial independence accept Christianity in the same form as it had been imposed on his country by those same colonial powers?”⁸² While John Paul’s example is of specifically Christian knowledge, what we have seen in the foregoing provides support for extending this analysis to the case of natural knowledge of God.

In addition, Vatican II also insisted that atheism all too often arises from a well-meaning protest against the evil in the world and, in some cases, the inadequate Christian credentials of the faithful.⁸³ The distinction between implicit and explicit faith (common in Catholic circles) is not one that Kierkegaard clearly made, but the category makes some sense of his insistence that the passionate pagan has more truth than the nominal Christian. It also helps us to understand what religious harm individuals can do to others without necessarily robbing them of their eternal reward.



Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous attacks on natural theology’s attempts to prove God’s existence go only so far. So long as there is an acceptable epistemological option available to ground our awareness of the principles that undergird the premises of demonstrative arguments, then some demonstrative arguments may in fact prove God’s existence with certainty by natural reason (so long as natural reason is properly understood). In fact, it has been argued elsewhere that Kierkegaard himself accepts some aspects of the epistemological picture that would make this possible.

Kierkegaard has a positive role to play in helping to “purify” reason, as John Paul II had it, since he urges us to remind ourselves of the theological moorings that enable reason to discern what Benedict XVI called “the fact of creation.” Further, Kierkegaard and the Catholic tradition

appear to share a sense that the knowledge of God's existence should be available to all, independently of whether these individuals have the capacity for digesting complex demonstrative arguments. Parallels to aspects of Kierkegaard's work can be found in Newman's understanding of conscience and in Rahner's notion of transcendental knowledge of God. All of this would seem to be a natural knowledge independent of a particular revelation by God.

Kierkegaard and the Catholic tradition can also be mutually reinforcing on the issue of non-culpable atheism. There are resources in both for implicit theism in the face of explicit atheism. In addition, the phenomenon of social sin in the Catholic tradition may indicate an advance upon Kierkegaard's thought on this issue, but Kierkegaard's depth in probing human despair can also be helpful in imagining cases of what we might, following Evans, call "motivated atheism."⁸⁴ In some cases, the motivation is understandable, but it is not ultimately an "excuse."