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*A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions*

*VERN S. POYTHRESS*

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*Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions*

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To John Frame,
my teacher, colleague, and friend

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PART I

# Basic Issues in Exploring Big Questions

# 8

# Perspectives on God

We can now begin to employ perspectives on what exists. We begin with God, who is the Creator, the one whose existence is the foundation for everything else. John Frame's book *The Doctrine of God*[1] gives a massive exposition. So in this chapter we may confine ourselves to summarizing and supplementing some of what he says.

The Bible offers us many perspectives on God. God is Father, shepherd, king, husband (Hos. 2:16), fortress, light, and more. (For discussion of perspectives on God's Trinitarian character, see appendix B.) Let us consider one strand that will help us think about our relation to God: the passages that speak of God as king or Lord. As Lord, God has transcendent authority and power. He also exercises his authority and power in the world. In doing so, he shows himself to be *immanent*, or present, in the world.

## Frame's Terms and Their Meanings

We are following John Frame at this point by using his triad of authority, control, and presence. This triad of perspectives expresses the meaning of God's *lordship*. His lordship comes to expression in the covenantal relationship between God and man (and subordinately in God's relation to other things that he has created). We then group together authority and control as aspects of transcendence, while presence is the expression of immanence. We may choose more

[1] John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002).

than one way of talking about such things. What matters is that we use terminology in the service of expressing faithfully the character of God, the God who reveals himself faithfully in Scripture.

## Transcendence and Immanence

So God is both transcendent and immanent. Philosophical thinking about God has often seen transcendence and immanence in tension with each other. People may reason that if God is transcendent, he must be distant and inaccessible; he is not immanent. On the other hand, if he is immanent, if he is involved, then he is virtually a part of the world and is not transcendent.

But biblical teaching about God does not produce a tension. Precisely because God has authority and power, he has power to act in the world and to be present to his creatures. Conversely, his presence is always the presence of one who is Lord, who expresses his authority and requires our obedience. His presence brings to bear on us his authority and control.

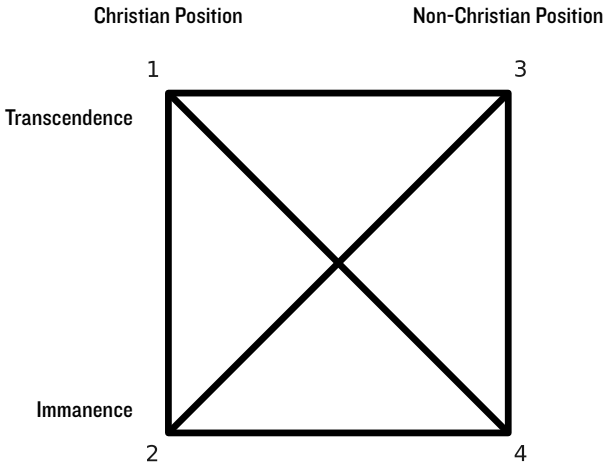
John Frame expresses the compatibility of transcendence and immanence using a square diagram, which has come to be known as "Frame's square" (see fig. 1).[2]

The upper left corner (1) represents the biblical view or Christian view of God's transcendence. God has ultimate authority and exerts his control over all the world that he has made. The lower left corner (2) represents the Christian view of God's immanence. God is intimately present with all that he has made—especially with human beings, made in his image. His presence expresses his authority and control, so there is no tension between immanence and transcendence in this Christian view.

The right-hand side of the square represents the non-Christian position on transcendence and immanence. Of course, in a sense there are many non-Christian positions, but they show common features. They all try to evade the true nature of God by producing a substitute picture or counterfeit, which differs radically from the Christian position and yet shows enticing similarities to it.

[2] John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 14; Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 113.

Figure 1




The upper right corner (3) represents the non-Christian view of transcendence. According to this view, God is inaccessible, distant, and uninvolved. The lower right corner (4) represents the non-Christian view of immanence. According to this view, if and when God becomes involved in the world, he is virtually identical to the world and is subject to the same limitations that characterize the world (see fig. 2 for the full picture).

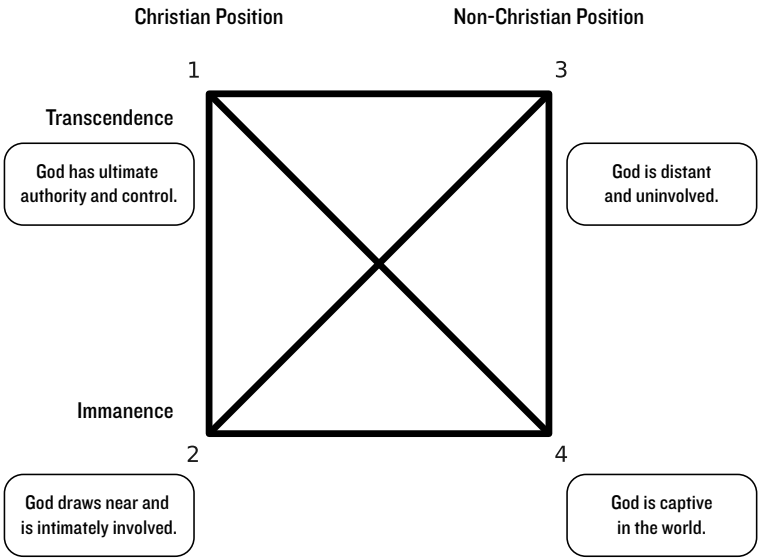
Pantheism is one example of a non-Christian view. Pantheism says that God is identical with the world, thus expressing non-Christian immanence (corner 4). At the same time, pantheism implies that God is impersonal, so he (or rather it) ends up being distant and uninvolved in relation to the details of an individual's life. This feature of distance expresses non-Christian transcendence (corner 3).

Advocates of materialism do not believe in a personal God. But matter itself becomes the principal substitute for God. It imitates some of the features of God in being self-existent and virtually eternal. Matter is impersonal and thus uninvolved with persons. It thereby expresses non-Christian transcendence. It is also identical with the world, expressing non-Christian immanence.

In Frame's square, the diagonals of the square represent contradictions. The Christian view of transcendence in corner 1 con-

tradicts the non-Christian view of immanence in corner 4. The Christian view of immanence in corner 2 contradicts the non-Christian view of transcendence in corner 3. These contradictions mean that non-Christians have a very different view of God, or of a God-substitute, than do Christians. They are trying to escape the claims of the true God.

Figure 2




The horizontal lines in Frame's square represent similarities in language. A subtly crafted explanation of non-Christian transcendence in corner 3 can sound like the Christian view of transcendence in corner 1. Both can use the same words, such as *transcendence* or *exaltedness*. But the meanings differ. Similarly, an explanation of non-Christian immanence in corner 4 can sound like Christian immanence in corner 2. But the meanings differ.

What difference does it make? The Bible teaches that God is radically distinct from what he creates. He is eternal, while his creatures are not. He is all-powerful, while his creatures are not. The distinction between God the Creator and his creatures is a most basic metaphysical distinction. But Frame's square shows

that non-Christians can misconstrue the distinction. They make plausible claims, and the claims can creep into the minds of Christians as well. Frame's square makes it plain that we must have the right *kind* of distinction between God and his creatures. The distinction affirms his authority and control; it does not imply that he is distant and uninvolved.

## Epistemological Implications

As usual, metaphysics and epistemology (the nature of knowledge) go together. The metaphysical distinction between God and creation carries with it implications for how we think about knowledge, both knowledge of God and knowledge of the world.

A Christian naturally has a distinctive approach to knowledge because God is the primary knower. God knows himself completely: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one *knows* the Son except the Father, and no one *knows* the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt. 11:27).

What about *human* knowledge? Human beings are created in the image of God:

> Then God said, "Let us make man *in our image, after our likeness*." (Gen. 1:26)

> So God created man *in his own image*,
> *in the image of God* he created him;
> male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:27)

Human beings are intelligent, thinking creatures because God made them that way. Their thinking imitates God's thinking. But there is a difference. God is the original. His knowledge is infinite and unsearchable (Ps. 147:5; Isa. 40:28). Human knowledge is derivative and limited.

Human beings at their best imitate God by thinking God's thoughts after him. Any truth that we know, God knows first. Truth resides first of all in God's mind. He is the ultimate authority for knowledge because he is transcendent. And then, as a human being

comes to know, what he knows reflects the truth of God. But that does not mean that the finite human mind becomes identical with God's infinity. People think God's thoughts after him *analogically*. Their thinking is analogous to God's because they are made in the image of God. But the analogy does not amount to identity.

Thus we have two levels of knowledge: God's knowledge and human knowledge.[3] Most philosophy has tackled the question of knowledge as if there were only one level. That disturbs the whole project and sets it off in a wrong direction.

## Transcendence and Immanence in Knowledge

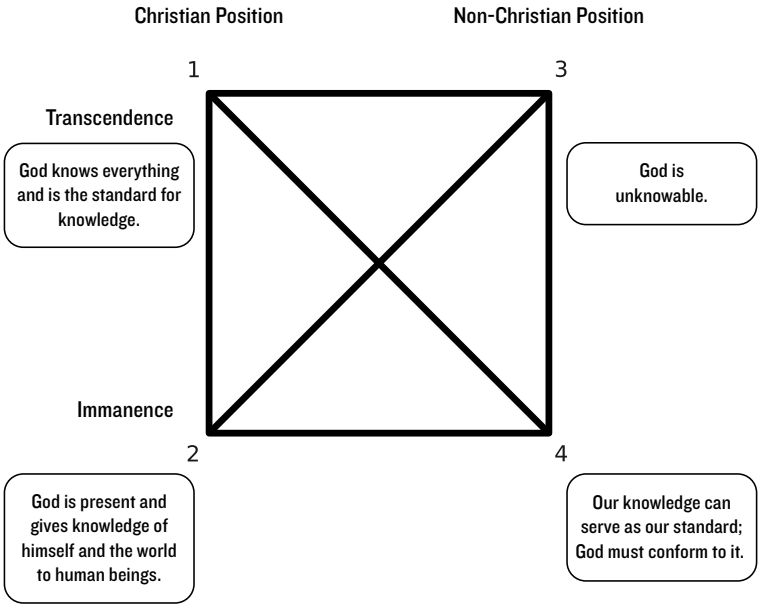
We may summarize the difference between Christian and non-Christian thinking about knowledge by using Frame's square again. This time, we ask what transcendence and immanence look like when we consider the issue of knowledge (see fig. 3).

The upper left-hand corner (1) summarizes the Christian view of God's transcendence. God's transcendence implies that he knows everything and that his knowledge is the standard for all knowledge. The lower left-hand corner (2) summarizes the Christian view of God's immanence. God through his presence, through the Holy Spirit, gives knowledge to people. This knowledge includes knowledge of God himself and of truths about the world, truths that God has established. Our knowledge can be true, even though it is derivative.

Now let us consider the right-hand side of the square. The upper right-hand corner (3) symbolizes the non-Christian view of God's transcendence. This view says that God is unknowable. The non-Christian view of God's immanence, in corner 4, says that we as human beings can serve as the ultimate standard for what can and cannot be the case, and for what counts as knowledge. God, if he exists and if we talk about him, must conform to our knowledge. Our knowledge is treated as if it were ultimate rather than derivative.

[3] Technically, we know that there is at least one other kind of knowledge—knowledge by angels and demons. We do not know much about this kind of knowledge—no more than what the Bible tells us. Since angels and demons are created by God, their knowledge is creaturely knowledge. As such, it is fundamentally like human knowledge, rather than like God's unique, original knowledge.

Figure 3




As usual, the diagonals of the square indicate contradictions. The non-Christian view of immanence (corner 4) contradicts the Christian view of transcendence (corner 1). If we are the standard, that contradicts the idea that God is the standard. Similarly, the non-Christian view of transcendence (corner 3) contradicts the Christian view of immanence (corner 2). If God is unknowable (corner 3), that contradicts the Christian claim that he has actually made himself known to us (corner 2).

The horizontal sides of the square represent similarities. The non-Christian view of transcendence in corner 3 can *sound like* the Christian view of transcendence in corner 1. It can use the same word *transcendence*. Or it can say that God is *mysterious* and beyond comprehension. A Christian view can say the same thing. But the meanings are different on the two sides of the square. For a Christian view, not to *comprehend* God means that we do not understand him completely or understand him in the same way that he understands himself. But in a non-Christian view the ideas of incomprehensibility and mystery can be changed to imply that God is unknowable.

Similarly, the non-Christian view of immanence in corner 4 is similar to the Christian view of immanence in corner 2. Both sides would say that we have knowledge on which we rely. But in a non-Christian view this truth is distorted in order to infer that it is possible for us to function as our own ultimate standard.

Much grief in the history of philosophy could be avoided by keeping clear the distinction between these two ways of thinking. The distinction has relevance not only when we think about knowing God, but also when we think about knowing truths about the world. In both cases, our thinking and our knowledge should imitate God, but on a creaturely level, in which we acknowledge God's ultimacy (corner 1).

## God Himself

Some people have worried about whether Frame's triad of lordship, by focusing on God's relation to man in covenant, does justice to God as he exists prior to human existence and prior to creation. When we discuss transcendence and immanence, the same question can arise. After all, the ideas of transcendence and immanence represent a way of condensing the meaning of God's lordship, and God's lordship comes to expression in covenantal relations between God and man.

When we focus on a covenant, we are focusing on *relations* between God and creatures, not simply God by himself. For example, transcendence occurs in the relationship between God and his creatures. God transcends creation. God exercises authority *over* creatures, so that his authority comes to expression in a relationship. Similarly, God exercises control over creatures, and his control over the world is also a form of relationship between him and creatures. Finally, God is immanent in creation, so immanence also expresses a relation between God and creation.

But God existed prior to creation. He did not have to create a world. God does not *need* a relationship to a created world in order to be God and to be complete. The reality of God's eternal existence leads us to ask what we can say about God in distinction from what

we say about his relationships to us and to the world. In talking about God's relationship to us, have we really said anything about God as he really is? Or are we speaking *only* about God in his relations to us, which are clearly less ultimate than God himself?

In my opinion, this worry does not take into account the way perspectivalism works or the way that our knowledge of God works. The triad for lordship offers a perspective, or rather three interlocking perspectives, on who God is, as well as on his relations to us. Frame's triad for lordship reflects within divine-human relations the triunity of God. Or, to put it another way, through God's relationships to us we come to know him. How else would we know him, after all? A divinely given perspective on God gives us God, just as Christ's revelation of the Father gives us knowledge of the Father.

God is eternally triune. Having created the world and human beings in it, God now relates to mankind in accord with who God always was and is. For example, God's authority over us expresses in relation to us and the world the fact of God's absoluteness as moral standard, which is associated with the role of God the Father as source. God the Father is the authority to whom God the Son responds in love. God's authority has eternal reality and does not spring into being only at the point at which God creates the world.

Next, God's control over us expresses his omnipotence, which is a manifestation of the innate power of the eternal Word and the Holy Spirit. God's power exists eternally, not only in relation to us. By his power the Father eternally begets the Son.

God's presence with us expresses God's omnipresence, which has an eternal manifestation in the presence of the persons of the Trinity to one another (John 1:1), and this eternal presence among the persons of the Trinity is associated with the Holy Spirit. God the Father has always been authoritative, God the Son has always been all-powerful, and God has always been present to himself in the fellowship of the persons of the Trinity through the Holy Spirit.

In contemplating the aspects of lordship, we are therefore talking about God, and not merely a shadow of God suitable for creatures. In God's lordship we come to know him in his eternal

Trinitarian nature, which is authoritative, all-powerful, and all-present.

Suppose, on the contrary, someone theorizes that we know a shadow of God only, and not God himself. We know "God-in-his-condescension-to-us," which our theorist says is only a shadow of the real thing, the true God. If this theory were right, we would be idolaters, because we would be worshiping only a shadow. That consequence destroys the whole purpose of the Bible, which is to lead to us to know and worship the true God, not a substitute. The theory about a shadow of God represents a form of non-Christian transcendence.

On the other hand, another theorist may say that since we know God and our knowledge is genuine and is knowledge of who God really is, our knowledge of God is the same as God's knowledge of himself. Such a theory would then imply that our knowledge could serve for practical purposes as an ultimate standard. We would have fallen into a non-Christian concept of immanence.

Or a theorist could go in another direction and say that, since all we have as knowledge is knowledge of "God-in-his-condescension-to-us," we must use that knowledge *as if* it were ultimate. Once again the theorist gives us a non-Christian concept of immanence in which our knowledge for practical purposes functions as an ultimate standard. By suggesting that "all we have" is a fixed body of "knowledge" of "God-in-his-condescension-to-us," the theory may also covertly suggest that we do not have personal communion with God, but have only communion with this alleged body of "knowledge." The disappearance of communion with God represents a form of non-Christian transcendence, where God (that is, the God who actually exists, in distinction from the body of "knowledge") is distant.

We must avoid both traps, the trap of non-Christian transcendence and the trap of non-Christian immanence. Covenantal communion with God, in Christ through the Spirit, gives us knowledge that is in accord with our capacity. Our knowledge is not the final standard (Christian transcendence). But our knowledge of God is real (Christian immanence).

We know that God has authority, control, and presence, all of which reveal who he really is. We know because he has told us, and his communication, which the Holy Spirit empowers us to receive, *really tells the truth*, not merely a shadow of the truth. That truth telling is rooted in Christ, the eternal truth of God.[4]

According to the principle of divine transcendence, God calls us as creatures to submit to the truths that he has revealed. If we go beyond those truths by picturing for ourselves a god who is *other than* the kind of God that he himself has revealed, a god who is always hidden *behind* biblical revelation, or a god who is ultimately unknown, we are acting in rebellion against God. We are acting according to a non-Christian principle of immanence, in which we go our own way, however much we may try to persuade ourselves that we are honoring God's transcendence.

We can also fall into traps if we try to prioritize a few pieces of biblical revelation. A theorist could say, for example, that almost all the Bible is presenting God in his relationships to us, but that a few verses, perhaps John 1:1 and Exodus 3:14, or perhaps 1 Timothy 1:17, present us with God as he eternally exists. In reply, we may observe, first of all, that John 1:1 and Exodus 3:14 and any other "special" verses that a theory singles out are, like all the rest of Scripture, covenantal communication adapted to us, suited to our capacity as creatures. All of Scripture is suitable for us. The fact of being suitable reveals God's eternal wisdom. Suitability itself reveals God! We run the temptation of trying to pry behind that universal suitability when we single out a few verses. The singling out of these verses may suggest that those verses, and they alone, get us beyond the level of suitability.

This theory also tempts us to fall into non-Christian immanence with respect to the few verses, because the theory proposes that in the few verses we obtain a more exalted knowledge that functions to control the rest of Scripture. The theory also falls into non-Christian transcendence with respect to all the other verses, because it implies that the other verses are "merely" suitable and do not give us the ultimate form of knowledge, "real" knowledge.

[4] See Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 32–33.

God allegedly remains "hidden," "distant," behind the texts because of their being merely "suitable."

Second, when we single out a few verses, we run the temptation of depreciating the knowledge that God gives us through many other verses. (We thereby fall into non-Christian transcendence, where we undermine confidence in knowledge of God.) We may overlook or depreciate the fact that God's relationship to us through any verse that he speaks to us gives us knowledge of God, not merely knowledge of our relationship or knowledge of a "god-in-relationship." "And this is eternal life, that they *know* you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). We know God through Christ. Christ incarnate is the ultimate "perspective" through whom we know God. Through covenant and through a relationship to God in Christ, we know him.

## Mystery

Before leaving the subject of epistemology, we should underline one further difference between a Christian approach and a secular philosophical approach. According to a Christian viewpoint, our knowledge always involves personal interaction with God. We are never masters of the process. Because God plays a leading role in our knowledge, and because our knowledge of God involves mystery, *all* our knowledge includes mystery at every point. Only God's knowledge of himself is nonmysterious. Historically, Western philosophy has striven for complete transparency, complete mastery, and absence of mystery. Underneath the surface, it has desired godlike knowledge—virtually to be God. That is one echo of the fall of man, in that he desired to "be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5).

# 9

# Perspectives on the World

We may now turn to consider perspectives on the world. As we have observed, every human being brings to bear one or more perspectives on the world. There are multiple perspectives because there are multiple human beings. And, apart from sin, this multiplicity reflects God's original design. God endorses it.

## God's Ruling by Speaking

We may refine our ideas by thinking about what the Bible says about God's creating the world and governing it providentially. We will again build on work already done, this time in my book *Redeeming Science*. As indicated there, creation and providence take place by God's speaking. For example, "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). God's speech specifies everything. He specifies that certain things will exist: light, the expanse of heaven, the sea, the dry land, the plants, and so on. He also specifies *how* they will exist. The plants will grow on the land. They will reproduce "according to their own kinds" (Gen. 1:12). Providentially, he specifies the coming of snow and ice and their melting:

> He sends out *his command* to the earth;
> *his word* runs swiftly.
> He gives snow like wool;
> he scatters frost like ashes.

> He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs;
> who can stand before his cold?
> He sends out *his word*, and melts them;
> he makes his wind blow and the waters flow.
> (Ps. 147:15–18)

God specifies everything: "he upholds the universe by the *word* of his power" (Heb. 1:3).

We do not directly hear the words that God sends out to command the world of nature. *Some* of his words are recorded in Genesis 1, but this is only a sample and a summary. Clearly there is much more than what the Bible records.

The Bible also indicates that God has words to say to us as human beings. The Bible presents his words in written form.[1] God had them written down with the purpose that he would still speak to us as we read Scripture today: "For whatever was written in former days was written for *our* instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures *we* might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). All of what the Bible says informs us about the world. What it says is true, because God is truthful. But that is not all. The Bible's speech is *definitive* for the world, because God's speech is original and superior to the world that he created.

## Multiperspectival Metaphysical Reality

The entire Bible, then, is God's communication to us concerning what the world is and how it is. It is God's own metaphysical statement. We ought not to equate God's word to us in the Bible with God's words of command that control the entire universe. But the one is akin to the other. Both are authoritative. The multidimensional character of what the Bible says suggests that God's word governing the universe is also multidimensional. It specifies and defines many dimensions to reality, not just one.

If we are not convinced by this comparison between the Bible and God's words of command to creation, we can consider another route to the same conclusion. We can know God; we can understand

[1] See especially John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of* God (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010).

him. But we cannot *comprehend* him in this full sense of the word *comprehend* (see chap. 8). Our inability to comprehend God suggests also our inability to comprehend God's word governing the universe. If we are not going to comprehend it, how may we nevertheless get a reasonable understanding of it, short of comprehension? How would we understand without knowing God?

We cannot; we must know God. And how may we best know God, if not through the way of Christ, as Christ speaks to us in the Scripture? Scripture is our natural instructor as to the metaphysics of the world, since the metaphysics of the world is completely determined and specified by God's speech governing the world, and his speech takes place in Christ the Word (John 1:1).

We may proceed still another way. The archetype for truth is in the mind of God. God knows all truth. In addition, Christ is the truth (John 14:6). When Christ says that he is the truth, the immediate context has a focus on redemptive truth. Christ is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), where the terms *way* and *life* deal with the way to redemption and fellowship with God. And in this verse the life of which Christ speaks is the eternal life in communion with God.

But truth in redemptive focus has a close relationship to all truth whatsoever. Christ and the Spirit mediate the truth. Christ as Creator of the world, in fellowship with the Father, is the source of all truth whatsoever. We know Christ through multiple perspectives, as is illustrated by the four Gospels and by the multiple analogies instructing us about God and about the Trinitarian character of God. Hence we always receive the truth multiperspectivally. God expresses the truth multiperspectivally, because he has one complete, unified body of knowledge as known by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

We conclude, therefore, that the metaphysics of the world is just what the Bible says, in all its multiple genres, multiple subject matters, multiple discussions of these multiple subject matters, and multiple paragraphs, which interlock with multiple human beings, whom the Bible presents with multiple opinions and multiple points of view (not all of which, of course, are approved by God!).

The world is incredibly rich! Enjoy it! Praise God for everything! Praise him for what you see and hear and experience, not only as you read or listen to the Bible, but in all your experience. God makes your experience just what it is in all its richness and in all its uniqueness as *your* experience. At the same time, you can appreciate other people's experiences as you interact with them and to a degree share experiences because they have resonances and similarities with your own.

We are all made in the image of God. Enjoy it! Bask in it! The experience is going to be so much more enjoyable, of course, the richer your fellowship is with God himself, who is the archetype, the source of all wisdom, joy, richness, and beauty that we experience. God is also the providential sustainer, who gives us our own life, each one of us, day by day.

When we describe this experience of interaction with the world, we presuppose that we have first of all experienced redemption through Christ. "You must be born again" (John 3:7). Unbelievers, as we have said, experience many blessings through common grace. But they are missing the heart of it all. God designed us for fellowship with him. "Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in You."[2]

We find rest in a life renewed by the Spirit, forgiven of sin, and restored to fellowship with God. Then we can look at the world with clear eyes. It is wonderful in the richness of its structure. God displays his wisdom again and again in this richness. He made a rich world, a multidimensional world, reflecting the archetypal richness that is himself. The world is beautiful because God is beautiful.

## Science as Ultimate?

What about science? Does science give us a more ultimate view of the world? Hundreds of years ago, people may have felt a fascination for philosophies that claimed to get down to the bottom of the world. Now, in the mainstream of modern culture, our fascination

[2] St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, 1.1.1, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:45.

is with science. Science, it is thought, digs down to the inner structure of the world. It gets us to the bottom of things, or at least close to the bottom.

For example, some people confidently tell us that the table in front of us is not *really* solid, but mostly empty space, with nuclei and electrons flitting around. The sun does not really move in the sky, but the earth spins and goes round the sun. The rainbow is not really the colors we see, but physical phenomena involving the refraction of electromagnetic radiation of different frequencies through liquid drops of dihydrogen oxide (commonly known as water).

In reply, we can observe that sciences give us perspectives. Often science supplies multiple perspectives even within a single field. Astronomers, for instance, can make calculations about relative positions of planets starting either from the earth or from the sun as an origin for their mathematical calculations. Or they may start from the moon or from Mars. Anyone who knows how the mathematics works knows that it will come out with the same results from each of these starting points, because they are related to one another by transformations of coordinates.[3] The calculations may sometimes be easier with one choice or another as a starting point, depending on the type of calculation. One may choose one's perspective.

God's coherence, along with the derivative coherence that he specifies by his word of command, guarantees the coherence of the perspectivally related points of view. The coherence is beautiful, and any one perspective offered in science is beautiful in reflecting the wisdom of God. Together, the different perspectives are like different facets in a jewel. People rightly have a fascination with and admiration for science, because at its best it reflects and displays God's wisdom and magnificence.

Science at its best means thinking God's thoughts after him, particularly those thoughts of his that lead to his words governing aspects of the created world. In this process, it is *we* who are doing

[3]To obtain the full power of the system of transformations, one must make the transition to Einstein's general theory of relativity, which allows systems of coordinates accelerated with respect to one another. See Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 218.

the thinking. Science supplements rather than undermines the ordinary world of experience, because God has given us the ordinary world *as well as* the technical details and technical expositions of science. The technical explanation supplies us with additional layers of rich wonders, about which we did not know just from ordinary casual observation with our own eyes. They are indeed wonderful, marvelous, and beautiful, displaying the wonders of the wisdom and power and beauty of God.

But in idolatry we may find ourselves carried away in the wrong direction by the wonder and amazement of it all. And so we give praise to science and scientific explanations, as if these were themselves the gods who made the world. They are not. The real God who made it, designed it so that we could see rainbows and see the sun move in the sky. He also gave us the pleasures of exploration and discovery of more dimensions, such as when we mathematically view the earth from the standpoint of the sun as center. These matters are discussed more thoroughly elsewhere.[4]

Previous generations may have been more likely to think that some philosopher or philosophy has gotten to the bottom of the world. A particular philosophy provided an attractive, plausible explanation that seemed to be more ultimate and more "solid" than the changing and sometimes confusing world of ordinary experience. The plausibility and attractiveness come from a perspective. For example, some philosophers have compared the world to a living organism. And the Bible itself, using the poetry of personification, indicates that there are some analogies here. But the analogies with life and with organisms are only one dimension. They go back to an origin in God, who is the living God, and whose life is reflected in the changes he brings about in the world, including the processes in living things.

Empiricist philosophy says that the "bottom" of the world is sense experience. Is that right? It is a perspective. We receive our daily experience in the context of sounds and sights and tastes and touches. Those are some of the dimensions of the world, and the Bible talks about them. But when the Bible speaks of them, it tells

[4] Ibid., chaps. 15–16.

of their connections with many other dimensions as well. We do not merely hear a sound; we hear a person telling us something. We do not merely see a red blotch; we see a rose. The person's words and the red rose are real. God governs them, and he gives us just the experience that we are having, day by day.

But what about dreams and optical illusions? Are they an exception? God who rules everything is also the one who gives people whatever dreams and optical illusions they experience. Their experience is "real" experience. But of course it has a different relation to other people than does normal waking experience. God has made dreams to *be* dreams, in distinction from waking experience, and gives us the wisdom to understand the difference. And there are all kinds of dreams, only some of which we remember when we wake. Extraordinary experiences, along with "normal" experiences, are all part of the richness of a world that reflects God's wisdom and glory.

## Reductionism

Both modern science and ancient philosophy, when taken as ultimate descriptions, give us forms of reductionism. They *reduce* the world to sense experience, or to matter and motion, or to some other dimension out of the world in its totality. When people use modern science this way, it becomes *scientism*, a total worldview. It becomes like a religion, because people have faith in it and give their ultimate commitment to an idea. They think that scientific explanations offer not only one dimension but an ultimate description, "the bottom" layer of the world.

Both scientism and most kinds of secular philosophy *reduce* the world to one dimension of the whole. They treat all the other aspects as either unreal or derivative. But reductionism is poverty stricken, not only in its threadbare endpoint consisting of one dimension, but also in its explanatory power. Where do the other dimensions come from, if we assume that they are ultimately unreal? The explanations always end up presupposing that we know about these other dimensions.

As an example, consider how people attempt to reduce life to matter and motion. Living things consist of cells, and cells consist of molecules, and molecules consist of atoms, and atoms consist of protons, neutrons, and electrons (and in the latest theory, protons and neutrons consist of quarks). So it all "reduces" to matter and the laws of motion. Or does it? God does govern the electrons and the atoms and the molecules. That is wonderful, and we may use that level as a perspective. But when we use it as a perspective on life, we already know intuitively how to distinguish life from nonlife. And we do not make the distinction merely by inspecting the atoms!

We understand life partly with reference to purposes and functions that keep cells and organisms alive—metabolism, cell division, information processing (in DNA and protein manufacture), signaling between cells, signaling within one cell. Decades ago Michael Polanyi pointed out that we cannot understand a machine or a living thing only by chemical and physical analysis, because such analysis, though wonderful on its own level, never includes insights as to whether the machine is broken or intact, functioning or nonfunctioning.[5] Often without consciously realizing it, biologists are constantly using ideas about purpose and function that in fact cannot be "reduced" to chemistry. God by his wisdom has specified coherence between the chemistry and the distinctly biological functions in cells.

In reductionistic explanations one dimension has become a substitute god. It, rather than God, explains the richness of the world. But that is fanciful. If we deduce richness from one dimension, it is because secretly our knowledge of other dimensions has already seen traces of them reflected in the one with which we started. We are using one dimension *as a perspective*. It is insightful; but it is not "ultimate," as if it disqualifies all other perspectives.

[5]Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 328–31. What is true of machines is true also of living things, in that they contain molecular machines within their cells. But living things show organic development, unlike mechanical machines. So it is even harder to explain living things on the basis of chemistry alone than to explain mechanical machines on the basis of chemistry.

## Flight from God

Scientism and secular philosophy nevertheless attract people. Why? They seem to give explanations, as we have said. One substitute or another offers the only plausible way of doing an ultimate explanation without appealing to a personal God. And in sin we do not want a personal God, the God of the Bible, because he holds us morally responsible and we are guilty before him.

## Secret Knowledge

Scientism and secular philosophy can also be attractive because they allegedly offer forms of *secret* knowledge. When scientists and philosophers write books, their knowledge is no longer completely secret. But it is still inaccessible except to the initiate. Advanced science requires prolonged study and training and considerable intellectual skill. Study of philosophy also requires intellectual interest and aptitude. A person's feeling that he understands what a philosopher says gives him a sense of superiority to most of the world.

Pride is a widespread human sin. In one sense, we can view it as the root of all sins: Adam and Eve showed pride in their own judgment when they preferred to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree rather than trust what God said. Pride is close to self-centeredness, in which each of us becomes his own ultimate god. Intellectual pride is one form of pride, tempting particularly to intellectuals and those with intellectual gifts. The smart person finds that he is able to understand sciences or philosophy, and such understanding gives him a position superior to everyone else—the rabble who live in the gutters of life by not lifting up their faces to see the profound truths that he has seen. Ah, the glory of it.

But of course it is a false glory. If the smart person sees a truth that others do not, it is because God has gifted him with being smart, and with being in circumstances that give him access to the truth. In addition, God in common grace has sent his Holy Spirit actually to give the truth (Job 32:8). There is nothing for anyone to boast of (1 Cor. 4:7; Eph. 2:9). Yet we do it. Sin is rooted in us. And

so are pride, and selfishness, and uglier things still. No one wants to think about such unpleasantness if he can avoid it.

Secret knowledge, then, has a terrible attraction. And what about the Bible? The Bible is not secret. God had it written for ordinary people, not just for the learned. Ordinary people, including weak, poor, and thoroughly unintelligent people, have believed it and placed their faith in Christ. The well-bred person might think, What a lot of despicable ignoramuses and weaklings these Christians are! But God hates human pride, and he bars the door to the proud. He saves the weak and the ignoble, partly to bring disgrace to those who think they are too good for this "ignorant" religion:

> For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.
>
> For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1 Cor. 1:21–31)

## Open Truth

Would it not be interesting if God gave us the Bible so that weak and ignorant people, by reading it and trusting in him through Christ, could know the deepest nature of the world? They could know that the world is a multidimensional creation of God. What

if, contrary to human expectations, God left behind in the darkness those who in their pride cannot bring themselves to believe that the truth about the world could be so open?

"Would it not be interesting?" I ask. But it is not only "interesting." In fact, God has brought it to pass in one fundamental sense. Philosophy, we have said, seeks wisdom. God has made Christ our wisdom (1 Cor. 1:30). Do you want to know the secret of the universe? Come to Christ "to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden *all the treasures* of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:2–3).

"It cannot possibly be that easy," people may say. In fact, it is not easy for any of us to come to Christ and give up our pride. It is "impossible with man," as Jesus says (Luke 18:27), because human pride gets in the way. "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you" (Matt. 21:31).

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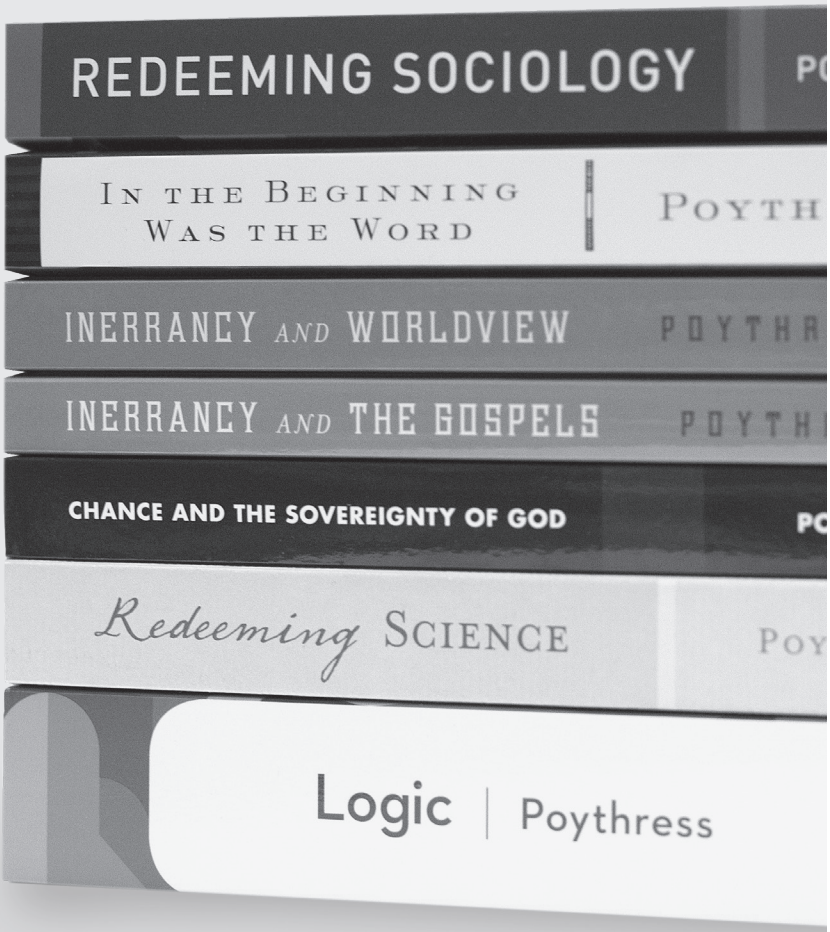


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