

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 26 | Issue 1

Article 3

1-1-2009

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Recommended Citation

Mulder, Jack (2009) "Kierkegaard and Natural Reason: A Catholic Encounter," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil20092613

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol26/iss1/3>

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KIERKEGAARD AND NATURAL REASON: A CATHOLIC ENCOUNTER

Jack Mulder, Jr.

In this paper I consider Kierkegaard's pseudonymous attack on natural theology with respect to how it lines up with Catholic thought on that topic. I argue that Kierkegaard's recently shown similarities to accounts of basic beliefs raise an interesting question when a Catholic hybrid of basic beliefs and natural theology, which I develop in the paper, is considered. Kierkegaard does not attack what we might call natural reason, or a natural awareness of God's existence, only natural theology's demonstrative capabilities, and his reasons for doing the latter, in our current epistemological climate, are shown to be mistaken.

Many a man will live and die upon a dogma:
no man will be a martyr for a conclusion.¹

—John Henry Cardinal Newman

1. Introduction

Kierkegaard scholarship of recent years has been at very great pains to dismiss the charge, classically laid upon Kierkegaard, of fideism.² Quite independently, fideism stands, in the tradition of the Catholic Church,³ as a heretical extreme of which so-called rationalism is the other pole.⁴

¹Chap. 4, section 3, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), p. 89.

²Terence Penelhum's book, *God and Skepticism* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1983), though hardly without independent merit, treats Kierkegaard as a fideist. More recently, Linda Zagzebski (*Philosophy of Religion: An Historical Introduction* [Oxford: Blackwell, 2007]) claims that Kierkegaard is a "radical fideist," a viewpoint that she associates with the claim that "faith is not only higher than reason, it is opposed to it" (p. 59). Kierkegaard's extravagant style provides plenty of grist for the mill, but scholarship of recent years, in my view, has shown that Kierkegaard's considered view cannot be understood in this way.

³In this paper, I will often use "the Church" as shorthand for "the Roman Catholic Church."

⁴See *Fides et Ratio*, ¶ 53. It should be noted that Vatican documents use paragraph numbers instead of page numbers. For an English translation, I will simply use the version available on the Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0216/_INDEX.HTM.



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.⁵ However, for the Catholic tradition, his repudiation of natural theology⁶ generally keeps him too close to the extreme of fideism. Thus, from the Catholic point of view, he can be appropriately reckoned as one of those thinkers who “helped drive faith and reason further apart” than they should be, despite the fact that he also seems to be ranked very highly among such thinkers, since he, along with the likes of Pascal, helped to “[liberate] reason” from rationalistic presumption, philosophy’s characteristic fault, according to John Paul II.⁷ Accordingly, the Catholic Magisterium has, as it were, an official position on Kierkegaard’s work: His work, while having widened the gap between faith and reason, nevertheless, contains “precious and seminal insights which, if pursued and developed with mind and heart rightly tuned, can lead to the discovery of truth’s way.”⁸ In this paper, I want to 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 interest of this article is not restricted to Catholic readers who are, in addition, readers of Kierkegaard. Linda Zagzebski has called Kierkegaard a “radical fideist,” suggesting that he occupies a rather extreme position on this issue.⁹ By contrast, the Catholic Church has a long history of appreciation of natural theology and natural reason’s ability to show God’s existence (on which see below). Although, as a Catholic, I disagree with Kierkegaard about some of these matters, I also believe that the possibilities for dialogue are significant between Kierkegaard and the Catholic tradition. Indeed, I think this encounter between two unlikely allies can serve as a helpful propeaedeutic for similar rapprochement between

⁵C. Stephen Evans’s books, *Passionate Reason* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) and *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006) are two of the best works that seek to rebut the charge that Kierkegaard is an irrational fideist, as opposed to a “responsible fideist” under which label Evans argues for including both Kierkegaard and (perhaps surprisingly) Alvin Plantinga (pp. 203–204 in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self*).

⁶In this paper I will understand by “natural theology” that portion of the enterprise that attempts to demonstratively prove God’s existence without special revelation. I will sometimes use the phrase “natural reason” or “natural knowledge,” usually to refer to a non-inferential knowledge not obtained through special revelation.

⁷*Fides et Ratio*, ¶ 76.

⁸*Ibid.*, ¶ 48.

⁹Zagzebski goes on to ask “whether there is a sense in which the radical fideist, Kierkegaard, is nonetheless quite reasonable” (*Philosophy of Religion*, p. 71). I think she is right to wonder this, but she seems to regard it as somewhat against the letter, if not the spirit, of Kierkegaard’s texts.

natural theologians and the kinds of Reformed epistemologists that have been skeptical of natural theology.¹⁰

The most obvious reason for the reservations about Kierkegaard's work in the Catholic tradition is the anathema pronounced upon those who would deny natural theology by the First Vatican Council, 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."¹¹ While Kierkegaard did repudiate natural theology, many have further assumed 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."¹² Evans has done much fine work in showing that Kierkegaard is unjustly lampooned in this way 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, just how far apart are Kierkegaard and the Catholic tradition?

Another part of the irrationalist myth about Kierkegaard is that he is so concerned with passionate Christian commitment that he cares nothing for Christian revelation along the lines of doctrine and theology. This, caricature, too, is false. The fact that Kierkegaard often gives way to flamboyant, and sometimes overdrawn, invective against many of his philosophical and theological disputants should not obscure the fact that his larger picture on these matters is ultimately quite subtle. Thus, although Kierkegaard's own theological views are hardly in harmony with Catholicism on every point, the depth of his own thought allows us resources for dialogue with the Catholic tradition that go beyond the more polemical of his pieces that often seize the limelight. It is high time to claim the

¹⁰See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," in Michael Peterson, et al., *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 261–273.

¹¹For references to dogmatic sources prior to 1950, I will use the standard *DH* numbers, which are keyed to the 41st edition of Heinrich Denzinger's (also edited by Peter Hünermann) *Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum* (Freiburg: Herder, 2007). From time to time I will quote an English translation and so will use the latest translation of which I am aware, Roy J. Deferrari's rendering of an earlier edition (the 30th edition), entitled *The Sources of Catholic Dogma* (1957; repr. Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Publications, 2007). In citing these I will use *DH* numbers, followed by references to Deferrari's text (which will be abbreviated *SCD*, and whose numbers are different because keyed to an earlier version of Denzinger). Thus, this citation of Vatican I's first canon on Revelation from the third session of the council is *DH*, 3026 / *SCD*, 1806.

¹²Brand Blanshard's essay, "Kierkegaard on Faith" (in *Essays on Kierkegaard*, ed. Jerry H. Gill [Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing, 1969]), espouses this sort of view. It is important to note in this connection, as M. Jamie Ferreira does, that "Kierkegaard never uses any Danish equivalent of 'leap of faith'" ("Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 207).

resources of contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship to stage a more informed encounter between Kierkegaard's thought and the Catholic tradition.¹³ In this paper, 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.

2. Kierkegaard's Attack on Natural Theology

While this paper is concerned with Kierkegaard's attitude toward reason generally, it will also focus 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*.¹⁴

Climacus tells us that

the ultimate potentiation of every passion is always to will its own downfall, and so it is also with the ultimate passion of the understanding to will the collision, although in one way or another the collisions must become its own downfall. Then, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think. (*PF*, p. 37)

That against which the understanding thus collides Climacus labels "the unknown" (*PF*, p. 39). Climacus notes that it "hardly occurs to the understanding to want to demonstrate that this unknown (the god) exists" (*PF*, p. 39). He then 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,

¹³This is a larger inquiry in which I am currently engaged, and of which this article forms a portion.

¹⁴Below I list the works and abbreviations for Kierkegaard's works in this paper: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments (CUP)*, 2 vols., ed and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) vol. 1; *Either/Or, Part II (EO2)*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus (PF)*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); *The Sickness Unto Death (SUD)*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers (JP)* by volume and entry number, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, vol. 1, 1967; vol. 2, 1970; vols. 3 and 4, 1975; and vols. 5–7, 1978).

because otherwise I would not begin, easily perceiving that the whole thing would be impossible if he did not exist. (PF, p. 39)

We may, of course, take it for granted that it is impossible to demonstrate the existence of a non-existent entity. Thus, the only horn that concerns us from the above dilemma is the horn that tells us that if “the god” (*Guden*) does exist, then it is “foolishness” to want to demonstrate it. The reason we are given here is that if we undertook to demonstrate the existence of God we would not be taking God’s existence to be a doubtful postulate—since then we would never “begin.” 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, pp. 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).

At this point, it will be helpful to consider William L. Rowe’s distinction between the two parts of theistic argument, of which the first part is the effort “to prove the existence of a special sort of being.”¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶ That is, one would perhaps not think to bow down and worship, for instance, the unmoved mover (even if proof for its existence were made manifest), but if the unmoved mover 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 very serious, especially if the first part, that of demonstrating the existence of a special sort of being, were successful. That is, since it is not the job of the second part to establish the truth of an existential claim, but to expound upon one

¹⁵William L. Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*, 4th edition (Belmont: Thomson, 2007), p. 20. For Rowe, these are actually the two stages of the cosmological argument, but I think the usefulness of his distinction can be extended in this case.

¹⁶Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 20.

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, p. 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, pp. 41–42).

The FO is more interesting than it looks at first, however. 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, p. 42)¹⁷

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.

While I think Climacus has certain forms of the teleological argument in his sights, (he mentions Socrates as having given a version of the "physico-teleological demonstration for the existence of God" [PF, p. 44]), this is hardly the only sort of proof under consideration, since Climacus clearly means to cut short all efforts at demonstrating God's existence. Rather, Climacus's arguments are directed at the enterprise of natural theology

¹⁷Compare *CUP*, pp. 203–204. We read there, "I observe nature in order to find God, and I do indeed see omnipotence and wisdom, but I also see much that troubles and disturbs. The *summa summarum* of this is an objective uncertainty. . . ."

in general, and, at most, the effort to demonstrate God's existence on the basis of God's works in particular.¹⁸

There are, however, relevant differences between, say, 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."¹⁹

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.

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,

¹⁸The Catholic tradition tends to emphasize this brand of natural theology, i.e., *a posteriori* proofs for the existence of God, as opposed to *a priori* arguments. Although the latter form is especially exemplified in St. Anselm's famous ontological argument, this form is not as typical as the *a posteriori* proofs. No doubt part of the reason for this is St. Thomas Aquinas's long tenure as the semi-official theologian of the Church, coupled with the fact that he famously argued against Anselm's ontological argument. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 5 vols., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1948, repr. Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981), vol. 1. I will cite texts from this work using the Part, Question, and Article. Thus, this reference is from *ST*, Ia.2.1, esp. Reply to Objection 2. Climacus gives a criticism of Spinoza's ontological argument in the note on *PF*, pp. 41–42, but I will not deal specifically with this argument, since the focus in this paper is on natural theology, specifically as it is commonly conceived of in the Catholic tradition. Interested readers may wish to consult Robert C. Roberts, *Faith, Reason, and History: Rethinking Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1986), pp. 74–78, whose account of Climacus's discussion of the ontological argument seems to me to be on the mark in the main.

¹⁹*ST*, Ia.2.3.

and, finally, good.²⁰ Climacus appears to allege that theistic arguments presuppose the goodness of the Creator so as to move from God's works (the relevant conception of which, he thinks, already presupposes a theistic view of creation) 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. With regard to the cosmological argument, it is not immediately so clear, however, 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. The resources for mounting this first 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. Climacus insists that "Socrates did not have faith that the god existed" (*PF*, p. 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). 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*, p. 205). How then is there risk, or objective uncertainty, for Socrates, if God's existence is supposed to be the object of knowledge?

²⁰See chaps. 13, 15, 16, 18, and 37 of *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book One: God*, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).

²¹Note that one can accept a cosmological argument and not a teleological argument, at least in theory. In this regard, one might consider that the metaphysics behind Aquinas's cosmological arguments is largely Aristotelian, and that, while Aristotle believed in the irreducibility of form (which includes the idea that an organism will develop in a very particular way, much as if it were designed) in the universe, he did not believe in a "Divine Craftsman," and so would not likely have put forward a teleological argument. On this point, see Jonathan Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 18–19.

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*, pp. 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*, p. 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*, p. 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,

²²In previous publications, I interpreted this passage differently and in a way that was at odds with the interpretation offered by C. Stephen Evans in his “Realism and Antirealism in Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*,” *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 157. I now believe that my earlier interpretation on this point was mistaken, despite the fact that I am not sure I can fully endorse Evans’s suggestion to interpret this along the lines of a moral standard. I do think he is right, however, when he notes that, “One might say, for example, that Kierkegaard means only that God comes into existence for a person in the sense that the person first becomes aware of God’s reality when she acts freely and responsibly.” I thank Nick Engel for help in correcting me on this point.

²³See *CUP*, pp. 162–163 and 199–200. Also, on the topic of natural knowledge of God in Kierkegaard, see Robert C. Roberts’s very helpful article, “The Socratic Knowledge of God,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Concept of Anxiety*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985).

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*, 2:2280)

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 only assure one of so much, and cannot cancel the "pain and crisis of decision" (*CUP*, p. 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 make 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

²⁴Kierkegaard writes, "Faith's conflict with the world is not a battle of thought with doubt, thought with thought. This was the confusion which finally ended in the madness of the system. Faith, the man of faith's conflict with the world, is a battle of character. Human vanity resides in wanting to comprehend, the vanity of not willing to obey as a child but of wanting to be an adult who can comprehend and who then will not obey what he cannot comprehend, that is, who will not obey" (*JP*, 2:1129).

²⁵This, or something like it, was the worry of an anonymous reviewer who wondered why we should care about Climacus's critique of natural theology if it is simply mistaken.

²⁶See Westphal, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1996), p. 52.

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.

3. *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 her original source for this doctrine on natural theology to be none other than St. Paul in Romans 1:20.³⁰ That passage reads, "Ever since the creation of the world, [God's] 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 sovereign God. In the aforementioned Dogmatic Constitution we read that this fact "can be known with certitude by the natural light of human reason from created things."³¹ Commenting on this passage, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

²⁷"*In the Beginning . . .*" *A Catholic Understanding of Creation and the Fall*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 28.

²⁸*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd edition, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference 1994), ¶ 155, which cites Aquinas's definition at *ST*, II-II.2.9 and *DH*, 3010 / *SCD*, 1791.

²⁹It is possible that Kierkegaard himself reacted to the overconfidence of the Hegelian system by an underconfident skepticism. See A. J. Rudd, "Kierkegaard and the Sceptics," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 6 (1998), pp. 71–88, esp. p. 87 where Rudd notes that a kind of natural knowledge of God through an "unsatisfied hunger" could have arisen from personal neurosis. In my view, the Catholic tradition should begin from the supposition that no such neuroses are present in ordinary cases, and let that be the standard for "objectivity" now conceived more positively.

³⁰Citations from Christian Scripture will be taken from the *New American Bible*.

³¹*DH*, 3004 / *SCD*, 1785. One might wonder (as an anonymous reviewer did) whether this canon requires demonstrative "proofs" or simply the knowledge garnered in one way or another from created things. I will not arrogate to myself the role of distinguishing where the heresy is to be found. However, the traditional position has been to reject *innate* knowledge of God (which should be distinguished from Reformed Epistemology's understanding of proper basicity and Karl Rahner's transcendental knowledge of God, on which see below) and to affirm that God's existence can be *demonstrated*, especially through the understanding that created things are the effect for which God is the cause. On this point, see Pope Pius X's famous anti-modernist oath (*DH*, 3538 / *SCD*, 2145) and Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. James Canon Batible, trans. Patrick Lynch, 4th edition (1955; repr. Rockford: Tan Books, 1960), pp. 13–17.

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.'"³² 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.³³

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."³⁴ While the attestation in question here appears to come from the world and from our knowledge of ourselves, the manner of this attestation is not addressed. This is significant, because we are told that things in the world attest that they do not contain their first principle, but this fact is precisely a *premise* for any cosmological argument.

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.³⁵

³²*Catechism*, ¶ 36.

³³*Ibid.*, ¶ 31.

³⁴*Ibid.*, ¶ 34.

³⁵I have adapted this formulation from Rowe's *The Cosmological Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 258. Rowe's formulation in *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 21 has "not every being *can be* a dependent being." The latter formulation still requires PSR for the argument's soundness (which of course Rowe disputes), and thus could be held to be *a posteriori*, depending upon what sort of access one allows to the truth of PSR. However, this formulation gives the proposition modal force, and could be rendered $\sim\Diamond(x)(Dx)$, whereas the formulation I have chosen in the main text would be $\sim(x)(Dx)$, which is logically equivalent to $(\exists x)\sim(Dx)$. $(\exists x)\sim(Dx)$ clearly has

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. 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, in his encyclical *Humani Generis*, appeared to insist, along with Rowe, on its importance, in particular, for natural theology, as one of the “constant metaphysical principles” that the Church accepts and protects.³⁷ 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. After considering the idea that we might be able to know PSR intuitively, and dismissing the suggestion for the reason that able philosophers fail to apprehend its truth, 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.³⁸

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.³⁹ But it is worth inquiring into just what we mean by the term, “reason.”

existential import, whereas in the case of $\sim\Diamond(x)(Dx)$, the proposition’s modal character reduces its existential import to conceptual analysis (we eventually get $\Box(\exists x)\sim(Dx)$, which requires an investigation into all possible states of affairs, rather than simply the actual ones). An existential claim like $(\exists x)\sim(Dx)$ is generally supposed to be discovered by empirical analysis of the nature of dependent beings. Thus, I have chosen the argument in the main text because it seems to me to be more clearly *a posteriori*.

³⁶Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 23, italics original.

³⁷DH, 3892 / SCD, 2320, italics mine.

³⁸Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 31–32.

³⁹To deal in any depth with such an issue (which concerned Newman so much in the *Grammar*) is simply outside the scope of this paper. For my part, I find it preliminarily helpful to consider the fact that Plantinga rejects the need for Cartesian certainty (as it seems does Aquinas), but also notes the need for what he describes as psychological certainty in order for a belief to be known (see Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993], pp. 76–77).

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."⁴⁰ That is, natural reason operates on the data given to us by the senses in such a way as to draw conclusions from such data, 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."⁴¹ 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."⁴² 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.⁴³ 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

⁴⁰ST, Ia.12.12.

⁴¹See Hibbs's editor's introduction to the selection of Aquinas's writings entitled, *On Human Nature* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), p. xi. Also, see John I. Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 49, where we read, "The concern here is not with skeptical worries and the focus is not on autonomous, individualistic investigation; it is rather with the sort of intellectual formation required so that what is most intelligible in itself becomes most intelligible to us."

⁴²ST, Ia.12.13.

⁴³One of Jenkins's chief claims is that "among Aquinas's epistemic terms there is no wholly unproblematic correlate for knowledge" (*Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas*, p. 121). Thus, however we might like to put contemporary epistemological puzzles, a thorough (and linguistically sophisticated) exegesis of Aquinas will be necessary in order to understand his epistemological contribution.

⁴⁴Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas*, p. 121.

having this kind of warrant are met.⁴⁵ A basic belief is therefore a belief that is warranted (though sometimes “justified” is used) in an immediate way, as opposed to being warranted on the basis of some other belief’s authority.⁴⁶ Jenkins makes it explicit that principles of the sciences, in the mould 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.⁴⁷ We thus might be able to construct an authentically Catholic hybrid of natural theology and basic beliefs by combining basic beliefs in Pius XII’s “constant

⁴⁵Jenkins is clearly in dialogue with Plantinga here, a point he makes explicitly. For Plantinga’s account, one should refer to his justly famous “Warrant” trilogy, of which the final installment is *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Jenkins himself writes, “There may be conditions (apart from the condition that the belief in question is true) for a subject knowing something to which, when he knows, the subject has no special epistemic access as to whether or not they are met; and he may be completely unaware of whether or not they are met” (*Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 120–121). By allowing for a certain kind of externalism here, I do not mean to contradict John Paul II’s claim that, “Within visible creation, man is the only creature who not only is capable of knowing but who *knows that he knows*, and is therefore interested in the real truth of what he perceives” (*Fides et Ratio*, ¶ 25, italics mine). This might seem to include an internalist requirement for awareness of having met the conditions for knowledge. I think, however, that what the Pope is actually insisting upon is that human knowledge is inherently self-reflexive (much in the way that inner sense perceives that the animal perceives, for St. Augustine in *On Free Choice of the Will* 2.4 (trans. Thomas Williams [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993], p. 37)). Thus, we are aware that our knowing faculty has been deployed, can ascertain, using the senses and other faculties, whether any impediments exist in the way of its proper deployment, and are aware that our human existence is the right sort of context in which this knowing can take place.

⁴⁶On this point, see Aristotle’s famous discussion in *Posterior Analytics* A.3. See *Aristotle: Posterior Analytics*, 2nd edition, trans. (with commentary) Jonathan Barnes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

⁴⁷The truth of a principle as basic as PSR is constantly presupposed, not argued for, in both Aristotle’s procedure and Jenkins’s interpretation of Aquinas. In support of the latter claim, notice that Jenkins writes, “A person can come to construct a demonstrative syllogism in the following way. Through ordinary observation one can come to know that vines shed their leaves annually, and one may seek the cause of this fact. One easily observes that not only vines, but also trees and other plants, shed their leaves. One can then discover that all deciduous plants belong to the genus of broad-leaved plants. One discovers, then, that *being broad-leaved*, having this generic form, is the cause of the deciduousness of vines. Moreover, since this is the genus of vine, *being broad-leaved* is in the definition of vine. Consequently one has arrived at that part of the essence of vine which is the cause of its deciduousness” (*Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas*, 14). Here it is everywhere assumed that one can indeed seek out the explanation or cause of the positive fact that vines shed their leaves annually, because it is likewise assumed that there *is* such an explanation. Aristotle certainly believes that the explanation of a given fact is a proper object of inquiry, on which see *Posterior Analytics* B.1, 89b23–25.

metaphysical principles" with natural theology's arguments that presuppose the availability of such principles.⁴⁸

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, who never seriously entertain the hypothesis that the existence of the suspected murder weapon in the relevant place is a "brute fact."⁴⁹

Thus, to return to our point of departure, 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 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 non-sectarian (but nonetheless natural and human) 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.

4. *Natural Reason in Kierkegaard and Catholic Theology*

In this section, I want to briefly consider two important contributions from Catholic theologians along the lines of non-inferential belief in God. 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.⁵⁰ Recently, however, Stephen R. Grimm has

⁴⁸Joe LaPorte is currently working on similar ideas, though with no connection to Kierkegaard. I have benefited a great deal from his helpful suggestions and criticisms.

⁴⁹I owe the crime scene example to William Rowe, who often uses such an example in the context of discussing PSR.

⁵⁰For example, consider John Zeis, "Natural Theology: Reformed?" in *Rational Faith*, ed. Linda Zagzebski (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), p. 50.

argued that Cardinal Newman's epistemological views are substantially in harmony with those of Reformed Epistemology.⁵¹ Newman, for instance, takes the case of a child (he supposes the age of five or six), who forms his belief in God, so it seems, without inferring it from other beliefs. He writes,

The child keenly understands that there is a difference between right and wrong; and when he has done what he believes to be wrong, he is conscious that he is offending One to whom he is amenable, whom he does not see, who sees him. His mind reaches forward with a strong presentiment to the thought of a Moral Governor, sovereign over him, mindful, and just. It comes to him like an impulse of nature to entertain it.⁵²

Here, it seems, the child finds himself with a belief in God as a Moral Governor, a belief that is not inferred from others, but comes to him simply by a connatural sense of conscience. There is a strikingly similar claim, though not as explicit, in Kierkegaard's ethical exemplar, Judge William, who is relating his experiences at the age of five (*EO2*, p. 266). William, we learn, was strictly brought up by his father, so as to inculcate this omnipresent sense of duty, and the father became, to William, as he discusses his Latin lessons, "the incarnation of the rule" (*EO2*, p. 269). Reflecting further on this aspect of his upbringing, Judge William writes, "Thus I received a very profound impression that there was something called duty and that this had eternal validity" (*EO2*, p. 269). Judge William even writes of this connection to the eternal in duty that, "this is the true demonstration of the immortality of the soul" (*EO2*, p. 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.⁵³

Zeis argues that belief in God's existence is not properly basic. I have found much to agree with in Zeis's chapter, but I want to argue that Catholicism can accommodate the claim that belief in God is properly basic (or, at any rate, that there can be a non-discursive, and non-perceptual, awareness of the existence of God), especially for those individuals who may have never considered (or indeed may not have the aptitude for adequately considering) PSR and/or the cosmological argument.

⁵¹Stephen R. Grimm, "Cardinal Newman, Reformed Epistemologist?," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 75 (2001), pp. 497–522. Grimm notes a difference between Plantinga and Newman in that the former includes specifically Christian beliefs among those that could be properly basic, whereas the latter does not (p. 515). It should also not escape our notice in this paper that M. Jamie Ferreira has fruitfully compared Newman and Kierkegaard in her article, "Leaps and Circles: Kierkegaard and Newman on Faith and Reason," *Religious Studies* 30 (1994), pp. 379–397.

⁵²Chap. 5, section 1, *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, p. 103, italics mine.

⁵³In regard to some of Kierkegaard's own views related to matters such as conscience, see C. Stephen Evans's excellent essay, "Can God Be Hidden and Evident at the Same Time? Some Kierkegaardian Reflections," *Faith and Philosophy* 23 (2006), pp. 241–253.

In a similar way, 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). 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). 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 or not.

This line of thought has many distinguished proponents, among them the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner. Rahner made an especially memorable mark on theology in his doctrine of the "anonymous Christian," which is often cited in discussions of religious inclusivism.⁵⁴ However, he also believed in what he called an "unthematic and anonymous" knowledge of God.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ 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."⁵⁷

While never directly repudiating the traditional "proofs" for God's existence, Rahner insists, "neither should this a posteriority be misunderstood in the sense that God could simply be indoctrinated from without as an object of our knowledge."⁵⁸ Thus, while Rahner does not wish to impugn the *a posteriori* character of the natural knowledge of God, he appears to want to insist, as seems fitting given the foregoing, that natural knowledge is never identical with what we might call *purely secular knowledge* (the latter of 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,⁵⁹ 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

⁵⁴See, for instance, John Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988), pp. 365–377, esp. p. 376.

⁵⁵Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 2006), p. 21.

⁵⁶*Foundations of Christian Faith*, pp. 20–21.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵⁹See, for example, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, pp. 28–29.

approve of much of what Rahner has said in connection with a transcendental knowledge of God. As early as 1838, he wrote,

The development of *a priori* basic concepts is like a prayer in the Christian sphere, for one would think that here a person is related to God 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 remaining would be to be able to pray, although upon closer inspection even this has been effected in us—so also there is no deductive development of concepts or what one would call that which has some constitutive power—man can only concentrate upon it, and to will this, if this will is not an empty, unproductive gift, corresponds to this single prayer and like this is effected, so to speak, in us. (*JP*, 2:2257)

In the margin for this entry, Kierkegaard also notes, “One can therefore also say that all knowing is like breathing, a re-spiratio” (*JP*, 2:2258). 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, which makes each knowing act possible. This, together with some of the material we saw earlier where Kierkegaard and Climacus recognize that all are aware, in some sense, of God, allows us to glimpse resources for a Kierkegaardian appropriation of something like Rahner’s transcendental knowledge of God.

What we have discovered in the foregoing is that, while the Catholic Church endorses natural reason’s ability to know God’s existence prior to revelation in the strict sense, one profitable and interesting way to do this is to affirm that reason can provide arguments and infer the conclusions from the premises, but nonetheless obtain knowledge of the principles that undergird the premises through the guidance of the very kind of properly functioning cognitive equipment that was, if you will, installed by our Creator. This is not to say anything more (or less) than that, while atheists can come to knowledge of a great many things, ultimately the atheist’s project is unworkable, from the Catholic point of view. 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, which 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), or through more traditional demonstrative evidence. No doubt this is why the *Catechism* tells us that this natural knowledge enables us to receive God's revelation.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹ 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)⁶² 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. Rahner's transcendental knowledge is not thematic (which has the drawback of being somewhat mysterious, but the advantage of not characterizing God as a simple object when nothing whatever exists without God's constant sustenance), but is still behind any knowledge of principles such as PSR. Newman's route of conscience is a different way, but it still relies on the active presence of God to the person to purchase the reliability of her moral awareness. While the Catholic tradition is somewhat more reticent to believe that the claims of faith *per se* are properly basic,⁶³ and I share this reticence, there is still much that Kierkegaard and

⁶⁰*Catechism*, ¶ 36.

⁶¹See Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self*, esp. chaps. 10 and 11. My view seems to be somewhere in between his "ambitious" and "modest" epistemologies, since I don't think we need a reply to skepticism (which disqualifies my view from being "ambitious"), but I think there are also elements of "modest" epistemology that may be too modest for the Catholic tradition (see Evans's aforementioned work, pp. 185–188).

⁶²These parallels or analogues may or may not be examples of properly basic belief in Plantinga's sense. To what degree they are does not concern me. What concerns me is that they are claimed to be examples of belief in God (available to all and sundry, without, for example, the uniquely special grace of infused contemplation) that are not based on the kind of demonstrative reasoning that would be possible only for the intellectual elite. This is parallel (though it need not be identical) to Plantinga's claim that his version of basic knowledge of God is not arrived at by way of demonstrative reasoning and inferences, but "in a much more immediate way" (*Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 175).

⁶³See, for instance, Thomas D. Sullivan, "Resolute Belief and the Problem of Objectivity," in *Rational Faith*, pp. 110–139. See also *Catechism*, ¶ 153–¶ 165. Although I am reluctant to include the claims of faith under the category of things that are properly basic (largely because I want to agree with Sullivan that belief in them, under ordinary circumstances, is meritorious), I can well imagine one of the great mystics having, as it were, unimpeachable, non-demonstrative, evidence for supernatural

Catholicism have in common with respect to the epistemological underpinnings of theistic belief.

There is not space here to argue for why natural theology and proper basicity, here blended, can both independently, as well as jointly, escape the charge that they make all atheism culpable.⁶⁴ On Kierkegaard's behalf, Evans has already argued persuasively that the Dane can escape the force of this charge.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ 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. Catholic readers of Evans's work will likely note the parallel between his understanding of conscience in Kierkegaard's famous distinction between the passionate pagan and the nominal Christian (on which, see *CUP*, p. 201) and those without an "explicit" knowledge of God in Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*.⁶⁷

In addition, the Catholic Church of recent years has made it clear that, while theistic knowledge is available to all, the acquisition of "explicit" knowledge of God is often hampered by the sins, not just those of the relevant individual, but also the sins of other individuals and even, in a certain sense, societies.⁶⁸ Indeed, 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.⁶⁹ We read, "Not infrequently atheism is born from a violent protest against

claims of faith. On this latter issue, see John Zeis, "Natural Theology: Reformed?," esp. pp. 60–65.

⁶⁴In a book manuscript I am preparing, of which an expanded version of this paper forms a chapter, an argument for this claim, with texts from Kierkegaard and Catholic sources, forms a brief section unto itself.

⁶⁵Despite the fact that I regard Evans's defense of this point to be successful, it should at least be admitted that it is altogether easy to acquire the *prime facie* impression that Kierkegaard thought all atheism was culpable from passages such as *SUD*, p. 95, where Anti-Climacus claims that the reason that one does not understand what is right is that one is unwilling to understand what is right.

⁶⁶Evans, "Can God Be Hidden and Evident at the Same Time? Some Kierkegaardian Reflections," pp. 246–247.

⁶⁷*Lumen Gentium*, ¶ 16. English translations of Vatican II documents can be found at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm

⁶⁸On social sin, see John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, ¶ 16. For a translation, I have used the Vatican translation, available at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia_en.html

⁶⁹John Paul II makes a similar claim about Mahatma Gandhi in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, trans. Jenny McPhee and Martha McPhee, ed. Vittorio Messori (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), pp. 79–80.

the evil in the world."⁷⁰ And also, "believers can thus have more than a little to do with the rise of atheism."⁷¹ The distinction between implicit and explicit faith is not one that Kierkegaard clearly made, but it does help us to understand what religious harm individuals can do to others without necessarily robbing them of their eternal reward.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous attacks on natural theology's attempts to prove God's existence only go 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, and I have argued that there is, 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 elsewhere⁷² that Kierkegaard himself accepts some aspects of the epistemological picture that would make this possible.

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 have the acumen for digesting complex demonstrative arguments. There are strong parallels to aspects of Kierkegaard's work that 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 quite 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, especially when considering the voice of moral conscience. 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 be helpful in imagining cases of what we might, following Evans, call "motivated atheism."⁷³ In some cases, the motivation is understandable, but it is not ultimately, an "excuse."⁷⁴

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⁷⁰*Gaudium et Spes*, ¶ 19.

⁷¹*Ibid.*

⁷²I have in mind Evans's work on externalist epistemology and Kierkegaard, which can be found in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self*.

⁷³Evans, "Can God Be Hidden and Evident at the Same Time? Some Kierkegaardian Reflections," p. 246.

⁷⁴I wish to thank the Provost's Office at Hope College as well as David Cunningham and the CrossRoads Project at Hope College, a Program for the Theological Exploration of Vocation, funded in part by the Lilly Endowment, Inc., for grants that supported this research. Thanks also to Joe LaPorte for reading a draft, and to Tom Flint and two anonymous reviewers for comments. A very special word of thanks goes to Nick Engel and Robin Litscher, two undergraduate students who worked very hard with me to make this article substantially better than it otherwise would have been.