

THE
TEST

THE TEST

A SEEKER'S JOURNEY TO THE
MEANING OF LIFE

DEAN DAVIS

REDEMPTION  PRESS

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Thomas Aquinas once wrote, “Within every soul there is a thirst for happiness and meaning.” I gratefully dedicate this book to the One who has filled my life with both, and to seekers everywhere who are earnestly looking for the same.

Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood
For the good or evil side.
Some great cause, some great decision,
Offering each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by forever,
'Twixt that darkness and that light.

—*James Russell Lowell*

I wanted to make the films so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery. Not having enough interest in the mysteries of life to ask the question, “Is there a God or is there not a God,”—that, for me, is the worst thing that can happen. I think you should have an opinion about that. Or you should be saying, “I’m looking. I’m very curious about this, and I’m going to continue to look until I can find an answer. And if I can’t find an answer, then I’ll die trying.”

—*George Lucas*

We are not trying to please men,
but God, who tests our hearts.

—*Paul of Tarsus*

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PROLOGUE

RETURN WITH ME now to a beautiful spring morning in 1999, and to the teacher's lounge of a small elementary school located in Santa Rosa, California. Class is shortly to begin. As if oblivious to that fact, a middle-aged man—a substitute teacher—is standing alone, lost in thought before the faculty bulletin board. His eyes are fixed upon a little poster that reads as follows:

THIS LIFE IS A TEST.
IF IT HAD BEEN A REAL LIFE
YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN GIVEN INSTRUCTIONS
ON WHERE TO GO AND WHAT TO DO.

At first the man cannot help but laugh. Indeed, an involuntary “Amen!” almost escapes his lips. How many times—especially in recent years—has he ached for greater clarity about his direction in life? How many times has he felt that it was somehow hidden in darkness, engulfed in silence? Yes, he finds it comforting to know that others have experienced the same struggle, and healing to be able to laugh out loud with them about our common plight.

Yet as the true meaning of the poster begins to sink in, the man's laughter quickly fades. One by one, insights fill his mind, slowly carrying his thoughts into the depths.

First, he recognizes that for all its humor this poster is either an implicit plea for help, or an explicit cry of despair. “*The author,*” he reasons, “*is saying that human life can never be real, for real life would come with instructions—presumably at the mouth of a divine creator who would tell us what he wants us to know and what he would have us to do. Yet the author*

obviously believes there are no such instructions, probably because he believes there is no such creator. He thinks we are alone in the universe, and that human existence is an absurd 'test'—a trial run for a real life that, tragically enough, will never come."

As he ponders this gloomy conclusion, faceless people begin to appear at the edges of his imagination. First, he sees the anonymous author of the poster, and also the anonymous teacher who put it up in the lounge. Just behind them he thinks he sees a mass of anonymous "baby-boomers," multitudes of skeptical souls whom the author and the teacher quite likely represent. Next there arises a huge cloud of high schoolers, many of whom he has taught, and some of whom he knows have already embraced the poster's formula for despair. Then comes a smaller cloud, this time of little children; children too young and too unspoiled to get the joke, but who soon might—and might take it to heart—unless someone can get to them first with an alternative message of hope. Finally—as if through the lens of his own past experience—he catches an unsettling glimpse of millions upon millions the world over; of the famished and fearful faces of all who have ever given up on the very possibility of "real life."

But this is not the end of his reverie. For now he is struck by a very different kind of thought, and along with it, a delightful irony. To begin with, he realizes that this poster—so clearly designed to poke sardonic fun at a life without meaning—actually contains the hidden key to discovering what that meaning is! Or so he reckons, since in recent years he himself has become convinced that life really is a test!

Mulling that thought afresh, he recalls once again his own long and difficult journey: the early years of disillusionment with philosophy; the chilling specter of a world without "instructions;" the subsequent years of spiritual awakening, questing, and far-flung religious experimentation; the dreadful season of crisis and collapse; the climactic months of resolution and renewal; the ensuing years of struggle, healing, study, service, widening insight, and ever-deepening joy.

And thus, with his grateful mind fully returned to the present, he makes his final response to the poster before him: *"Yes, life is a test, but not an empty trial run; not a mockery of life as it should be. Instructions HAVE been given. We HAVE been told where to go and what to do. Real life really IS possible—if only we are willing to take the test."*

Then, with the bell just about to ring, a sudden recollection brings yet another irony to his attention, an irony that both surprises and encourages him. Yes, in recent years he has been thinking about life as a test. But more than this, he has been trying to write of it as such. Indeed, there is already a book, painfully slow in taking shape, almost languishing. Standing before

the poster, feeling once again the anxious longing of all who must take the test, he therefore wonders: “*Is this morning—this moment— a work of Providence? Is it a confirmation of the value of the book? Could it even be an exhortation to finish it?*”

Ever the mystic, he answers “yes” to all of the above. Quickly, then, he removes a 3x5 card from his brief case and jots down the words of the poster *verbatim*. Tucking it safely away in his shirt pocket—giving both it and his heart a little pat of satisfaction—he resolves once again to finish the book, and also to make good use of this remarkable event. *Perhaps*, he says to himself, *I could even use it in the prologue.*

For the moment, however, he must rush off to his classroom and teach the fourth graders. As he does, he finds himself hoping that somehow he will be able to relate—even to these ten-year-olds—the simple truths that have gripped his heart once again: life really is a test; instructions really have been given; and for all who are willing to follow the instructions and take the test, there awaits the unspeakably precious prize of *real life*.

PART 1

LIFE: A MESS OR
A TEST?

LIFE: A MESS OR A TEST?

IN OUR DIFFICULT journey through this world it is always possible—and sometimes quite helpful—to experience a change in perspective. The following story about the ancient Mongol king, Genghis Kahn, supplies a memorable illustration of this important truth.

Having just returned from the rigors of the battlefield, the victorious Kahn decided to refresh himself with a day of hunting in the mountains. At sunrise he therefore exited the city with his courtiers at his side, his eager hounds before him, and his faithful hunting falcon perched upon his wrist. But alas, despite high hopes for a great day of sport, the little party came upon no game at all. Meanwhile, the weather grew hot and the men and animals irritable. Finally, the exasperated king decided to dismiss his entire retinue: if he could not hunt, at least he could enjoy a solitary ride through the forest. He even bade farewell to his beloved falcon: at the flick of his wrist she rose into the air and disappeared towards home.

But once again, events seemed to conspire against the king, for now he discovered that he had forgotten his water. Indeed, by mid-afternoon the thirsty traveler could think of little else but finding a spring or a creek where he could refresh himself with a drink. Happily, the trail finally brought him to a rocky hillside where Kahn rejoiced to see a thin trickle of water descending from somewhere above. Immediately he leaped from his horse, took out his cup, placed it beneath the trickle, and watched impatiently as the water entered his vessel one precious drop at a time.

After a long half hour, the cup was finally filled. Carefully, the king reached his hand down, picked it up, and set it to his lips. But before he had tasted even a drop, something extraordinary happened. The air whirred all around him, the sun was lost in shadow, a cry pierced his ears, and—to his utter amazement—his own trusty falcon knocked the cup out of his hands!

“What in the world has gotten into her?” muttered the puzzled monarch as he watched the bird disappear to the rocks above. But there was nothing for it. All he could do was start again.

And so, after another long wait, the thirsty traveler once again reached down for an even more coveted cup of water. But just as before, the agitated falcon suddenly appeared out of nowhere, flew straight at her master, and dislodged the cup from his trembling grip. “Enough!” cried the infuriated ruler, pulling out his sword and cursing the bird as it fled back to the rocks above. “Come and see what I will give you if you dare to reward me thus a third time!”

The time would come soon enough. Only moments later, with barely a mouthful of water in the cup, Kahn reached down with his left hand to pick it up, while in his right holding his sword at the ready. It happened just as expected. Once again the falcon streaked down from above, intent on keeping the cup from the king’s lips. But this time he was prepared. He met the attacking bird with three great slashes of his blade, one of which nearly cut her in two, bringing the winged hunter, bloodied and dying, to the ground.

“And now see what you have done to yourself!” cried the king who, for all his fury, could not help but grieve the loss of his beloved hunting companion. It wasn’t long, however, before he yet again noticed his thirst, and also the astonishing fact that his fallen cup had somehow lodged itself in a crevice. Try as he might, he could not pull it out.

“What is the meaning of all this?” murmured the incredulous ruler. “Why can’t I, the great monarch of all Mongolia, even get so much as a miserable drink of water?” And so, driven by powerful thirst and stubborn pride, he resolved to climb the hillside and get a drink from the hidden source above.

The climb was not easy, but at last he reached the top. And there, only yards away, he spied a shallow pool of unappetizingly murky water. “But it’s wet, for all that,” said the king to himself. “I’ll remove that big branch, kneel down, and have my drink at last!”

As he drew near, however, Kahn met with a sudden shock. The “big branch” was not a branch at all, but the decaying carcass of an enormous viper. Poised above the dark water, his eyes glued to the grisly sight, the king suddenly understood everything. The serpent had died by the pool. The water was fouled and deadly. The falcon knew it and had tried to warn him. And he, in stupidity and anger, had killed a wise and faithful friend.

Forgetting his thirst, a sad and greatly humbled Genghis Kahn descended the hillside. He tenderly buried the falcon’s dead body in the

ground, whispered a mournful good-bye, mounted his horse, and headed home.

Lessons to Learn

This poignant story contains three important lessons that serve well to introduce our theme in the present chapter.

First, the emperor's misadventure teaches us that *we are all vulnerable to misperceptions*, to wrong perspectives on what we see, hear, and experience. In particular, we learn here that it is all too easy to base our judgments about a given situation on faulty or insufficient information. Indeed, the sad end to Kahn's tale reminds us that a single piece of new information can altogether revolutionize our perspective, enabling us to see a real friend in an apparent enemy.

Secondly, the story underscores *the importance of slow, thoughtful, and complete investigation*. It tells us that if we desire to get at the truth of a matter, we simply cannot afford to let our initial impressions—or our corresponding emotional reactions—push us into a judgment we may live to regret. Yes, Kahn's falcon was behaving “badly” relative to his desire for a drink. But if only he had paused a moment to remember her intelligence, love, and faithfulness, he would soon have realized that such behavior was completely out of character. It was behavior that required further investigation and a better explanation. As it happened, however, Kahn allowed dark clouds of impatience, selfishness, and anger to obscure important truths that he himself already knew. He paid a terrible price for his mistake.

Finally, the story teaches us *the importance of being open to fresh perspectives*. Such open-mindedness becomes a cherished value in all who recognize our vulnerability to misperceptions, the danger of impulsive responses, the importance of good information, and the need for careful investigation. If Kahn had been such a man, humbly open to a perspective different from his own, his falcon would have lived to hunt another day.

And now, as we prepare to think together about the meaning of life, please permit me to ask a rather personal question. Does it ever seem to you that our world—religiously and philosophically considered—is like a crazed falcon, maliciously trying to prevent you from slaking your spiritual thirst in a dry and weary land? To be more specific, does it ever seem to you that the world of religion and philosophy is an indecipherable and purposeless mess; that the contending voices of priests and pastors, rabbis and roshis, mullahs and imams, scientists and skeptics, philosophers and pundits, all are so much screeching—a sure sign that human existence is not only meaningless, but a species of madness itself?

If so, I understand (and later on will explain why). But because I do understand, I want all the more to urge you to think again about the three lessons we have just learned: 1) we are all vulnerable to misperceptions, 2) we are therefore wise to investigate things carefully, and 3) we are also wise to be open to fresh perspectives. For my message in this chapter (and throughout the entire journey ahead) is simply this: despite appearances to the contrary, the world into which we have been born is *not* a religious and philosophical mess. It is *not* a crazed falcon on the attack, intent on robbing us of our last few drops of sanity, purpose, hope, and joy. Indeed, upon careful investigation—and with the benefit of a sudden change of perspective—it turns out to be something very much better, and very much more encouraging. It turns out to be a friend rather than a foe; a friend that is coming to test us rather than torment us; a friend that would lead us to the water of life rather than keep us from it.

But lest we get ahead of ourselves, let us begin our journey at the beginning. Let us first turn inward for a closer look at the *source* of all our religious and philosophical hunger and thirst: the provocative, persistent, and sometimes quite painful “ultimate questions” that dwell in the depths of the human heart.

A Heart Full of Questions

Many have been the definitions of man, but none was ever more cryptic—or penetrating—than that of the French philosopher Blaise Pascal. Pascal declared that *man is a thinking reed*. In so doing, he clearly directs our attention to *thought* as the essence of man. Outwardly, says Pascal, there is little to distinguish us from a reed by the riverside. Inwardly, however, there is much. For though the reed presumably has no inward life at all, man is almost wholly identified by the mysterious inward flow of ideas, words, images, emotions, and decisions that pass through an equally mysterious “self,” thereby enabling him to interact with the outside world. For Pascal, then, it is man’s thought-life that makes him unique among all creatures. It is the very essence of his humanity.

But perhaps this definition needs some refining. Why? Because we know that the higher animals also possess a certain kind of thought-life, yet this in itself does not make them human. It appears, then, that what makes man unique is not the *fact* that he thinks, but rather the *kind* of thoughts that he alone is able to think—e.g., scientific, mathematical, musical, historical, artistic, etc.

Now all this brings us closer to a good definition, but I would argue that we still need to refine things a bit further. For it is clear that all men

do not experience all kinds of thought, or at least not to the same degree. I, for example, experience very few thoughts about home improvements or landscaping, as my frequently frustrated wife will readily testify. Two of my daughters think of classical music day and night; my two sons would scarcely give it the time of day. When my former college friends get together, one of them gushes about tomorrow's Internet technology; yet even as he speaks, another's eyes glaze over until the conversation turns at last to poetry or ecology. Yet all of us are equally human.

There is, however, one stream of thought that all of us seem to experience. This stream—usually referred to as religious or philosophical—begins to flow at different times and in different ways for different people. Still, it is safe to say that sooner or later all of us find it carrying us in one direction or another. To be more specific, I would say that a person begins to experience this kind of thought when he starts to ponder one or more of *the questions of life*. These I define as the big religious and philosophical questions—what folks sometimes call the “ultimate” or “higher order” questions—that we humans have pondered, discussed, debated, and occasionally even fought and died for all throughout our history on the earth.

So then, if I had to improve upon Pascal's definition, I would modify it by saying that *man is a thinking reed whose thoughts are continually drawn upwards into the questions of life*.

Now before commenting further, let me be specific about what I think these questions are. Based upon a close examination of the recurring themes of philosophy and religion—and also of the constant musings of my own heart—I would suggest that the following nine questions constitute the irreducible core of the questions of life.

1. *What is the ultimate reality, the source of the universe and all that is in it?*

This question deals with what philosophers call *metaphysics*, the study of that which lies *above* or *behind* the universe, life, and man. As we shall see, it is the single most important question of life, primarily because it forces us to grapple with closely related questions about the existence and nature of an ultimate spiritual reality (god), and (assuming god exists) the exact character of his relationship to the world.¹ The importance of this question is also seen in the fact that the answer we give to it will exert a profound influence on the way we answer the other eight questions of life. More on this in a moment.

2. *What is the origin of the universe, life, and man?*

This question—the focus of *cosmogony*—lies at the heart of a much broader discipline called *cosmology*, the study of the origin, structure, purpose, and destiny of the universe. It is deceptively simple, since it involves a number of closely related matters that are of great interest and importance. For example, in thinking about origins we need first to determine what exactly “the cosmos?” is. Is it just the “time-space-energy-matter continuum” that modern scientists speak of, or might it include invisible spiritual elements as well? Is the universe eternal, or did it have a “true beginning”—a moment in time, or at the beginning of time, when it came into being? If it did have a true beginning, who or what brought it into being? And if it came into being, how and when did it reach its present form: more or less instantaneously, or over long ages of evolution and/or progressive creation? Down through the millennia—and never more so than today—people have disagreed about the answers to these basic questions of cosmogony. But all agree in asking them, for all sense that crucial keys to the *meaning* of the universe, life, and man may well lie hidden in the mystery of their origin and beginning.²

3. *What (if anything) went wrong? Why are evil, suffering, and death present in the world?*

This too is a cosmological question. It is rooted in the universal human feeling that things are not as they should be or could be. It wants to know where this feeling comes from, and what it signifies. It asks if natural (i.e., physical) and moral evils are simply unpleasant parts of reality as it happens to be, or whether they represent departures from an ideal state intended by a divine creator, a state somehow lost or as yet unattained.

4. *What (if anything) can be done?*

This question lies at the heart of what philosophers and theologians call *soteriology*, the study of “salvation.” Moved by a spirit of hope, it asks what, if anything, can be done to mitigate or eliminate the evil, suffering, and death that are in the world. It wonders if things can ever return to a lost state of perfection, or advance to a possible or promised state of perfection—and what such a state might look like. Also, it wants to know who is responsible for whatever degree of salvation may be possible: god, man, or the two somehow working together.

5. *Do the universe, life, and man have a purpose, and if so, what is it?*

This question—a favorite among youth—falls under the heading of *teleology*, the study of the *goal, end, or purpose* of the universe, life, and man. The central issue here is whether man is alone in the universe and therefore the only source of whatever purpose he may have, or whether there is a supreme being who has a specific purpose (or set of purposes) for his creatures. On the assumption that there is such a being, teleology goes on to ask what his purposes are and how they may be discovered, so that human beings may live a purposeful and fulfilling life.

6. *How shall we live?*

This question takes us into the controversial realm of *law* and *ethics*. It too involves a number of closely related questions. Where do feelings of right and wrong come from? What is the basis for personal moral standards and civil law? Are these phenomena merely cultural conventions? Are they part of an evolutionary process? Do they reflect divinely ordained absolutes by which all people must live if they hope to have a clear conscience and a just society? If such absolutes do exist, why can't we all agree on what they are? Assuming that they exist, how can we find out for sure what they are? How can we become better people, the better to live up to them? And what can be done when we find that we have *not* lived up to them; when we have wounded our conscience and desire to find a balm for its healing? All of this and more are involved in the little question that looms surprisingly large in our lives: how shall we live?

7. *What happens when we die?*

This is the central question of *personal eschatology*, the study of what happens to the “inward” part of a human being—the self or soul—at the moment of death and thereafter.³ Understandably, most religions devote considerable attention to this question, since man is not just curious but deeply concerned about his eternal destiny. Do the lights go out? Is there a heaven, a purgatory, or a hell? What about reincarnation and other spiritual realms? Some say we cannot know the answers to these questions till we die. Others argue that we can and must. But all of us know that we have a date with this most intimate and disturbing of all the questions of life.

8. *Where is history going?*

Here is the core question of *cosmic eschatology*, the study of the destiny and final state of the universe. Once again, many related questions are involved. Will our orderly universe inexorably follow the Second Law of Thermodynamics to heat death and final disintegration? Is the cosmos progressing towards some divinely predetermined goal? Does it move in a straight line towards a single end, or in cosmic cycles, perhaps endlessly retracing exactly the same steps according to a law of eternal recurrence? Most importantly, does mankind have an eternal future, or is human history a mere “cry in the streets,” a cry that will soon fall silent and never be heard again? Many assert that we simply cannot know the answers to such questions, while others contend that the very persistence of the questions strongly suggests otherwise.

9. *Can we find trustworthy answers to the questions of life, and if so, how?*

If this is not the most urgently felt question, it is certainly the most fundamental. How can we discover trustworthy answers to the other eight questions unless we are convinced that such answers exist, and unless we know how to find them? Here, then, is where a thoughtful seeker’s journey logically begins: with what the philosophers call *epistemology*, the study of the possibility and sources of reliable philosophical knowledge. In particular, the seeker must ask, “Are there any good reasons to believe that I really can discover the truth about the questions of life? If so, where exactly should I turn to find this truth? Should I look to natural science, philosophy, mystical experience, or to some kind of divine revelation? And if to divine revelation, how shall I know *which* revelation, since there are so many of them in the world, and since they so plainly contradict each other at so many important points? As these penetrating questions reveal, the ninth question of life clearly has first claim on seekers everywhere as they begin their difficult journey to religious and philosophical truth.

Crucial Characteristics of the Questions of Life

Are you now in a panic? Do all these questions—and all the questions within the questions—threaten to overwhelm you? If so, that is quite understandable, especially if you are just beginning to wrestle with the questions of life. But not to panic. Instead, let us take a moment to remember the lessons we learned from Kahn and his falcon. In particular, let us

consider the possibility that a little investigation into the *characteristics* of the questions of life might well produce a helpful change in perspective, a change that could not only calm your heart, but actually encourage and stimulate it for a great quest.

But what exactly are the characteristics that we need to consider? Here I will focus on three of the most important, showing that the questions of life are *universal*, that they are *existentially urgent*, and that they *supply the framework or infrastructure for our worldview*.

Universal

Observe first that the questions of life are *universal*. That is, they arise in every human heart. We can see this by looking back in time, out across the whole wide world, and deep into the recesses of our own minds. We can see it in the tomes of the philosophers, the scriptures of the holy men, and the inquiries of little children. We can hear it on talk shows, in coffee houses, and in the whisperings of our inmost thoughts. To be sure, these questions assert themselves differently in different lives. Some folks wrestle with many, others with only one or two. Some ask them early in life, others later. In some cases, the questions hit like lightning; in others, they arise slowly, like a storm or the break of day. But sooner or later all people have a date with the questions of life. These are “family matters,” the great themes over which the whole human race has ever entered into its most interesting and important discussions.

Existentially Urgent

The questions of life are also *existentially urgent*. By this I mean that we care, and care deeply, about finding the answers. Indeed, I am inclined to think that the questions themselves may be characterized as a kind of mental offshoot; that they are the conceptual flower of a plant whose taproot sinks deep into inmost ground of human need and desire. This is why finding the answers is so important to us: we feel that our security and well-being depend upon it.

A personal illustration may help to clarify my meaning here.

Back in 1970, at the very beginning of my own spiritual journey, the question that mattered most to me was the nature of the ultimate reality. At that time, I had reached an intellectual conclusion that the ultimate reality was “Big Mind”—an impersonal Mind or Spirit, of which the whole world (including me) was but a manifestation. In other words, I had become a pantheist: I believed that all is one, all is mind, and all is god.

But this was only the beginning of my quest. For though my intellect was satisfied to “know” that Big Mind was the ultimate reality, my heart needed something more. I wanted personally to *experience* Big Mind as the ultimate reality. This is why I began to practice yoga, meditation, and other spiritual disciplines. I wanted to align my “heart”—my personal inward experience—with what was going on in my head.

My point here is that the questions of life are best understood as *existential questings*. In other words, they are aspirations not only of the intellect, but of the whole person, undertaken with a view to the felt well-being of the whole person. Thus, in asking about the ultimate reality, a seeker is actually questing for a (deeper) personal connection with that reality. In asking about the purpose of life, he is actually hungering to know his own purpose, and to walk in it. By thinking about how he should live, he is actually yearning to find a life-style that is good, and therefore safe, honorable, and worthy of a reward. In considering death and the afterlife, he is really hoping for personal inward assurance about what awaits him on the other side. And so on.

If we are wise, we will never underestimate the existential urgency associated with the questions of life. What else can explain the fact that people think about them so often, investigate them so earnestly, hold their conclusions about them so tenaciously, promulgate their convictions about them so energetically, and at times even fight, suffer, and die for what they believe about them? Yes, the questions of life must lie extremely close to the core of our humanity. Indeed, because this is so true, they must, in some sense, be matters of life and death.

A Framework for Our Worldview

The questions of life also *supply a framework for our worldview*. To appreciate this fascinating characteristic, we need first to understand what a worldview is. By way of preliminary definition, let us simply say that a worldview is *a way of looking at reality as a whole*. To use a humble analogy, a worldview is rather like a pair of glasses: it is a set of religious and philosophical concepts through which we can behold and interpret the world around us, and by which we can also navigate our way through it.

Very importantly, this illustration helps us to see the true goal of religion and philosophy. Suppose that I am looking at a rose through a pair of sunglasses. I am seeing the rose, but I am not seeing it as it really is, since the tincture in the glass has more or less distorted my perception of the flower before me. Analogously, I may be looking at reality through a given set of philosophical concepts—a given worldview—but that is no

guarantee that I am seeing reality as it really is. What if my concepts are too few? What if some or all of them are false? In such cases, I will have an inadequate and/or distorted perception of the world around me. Here then is the implicit goal of all our philosophical questings: to find the one complete set of true philosophical concepts through which we can see reality without distortion or tincture; through which we can see reality as it really is. In other words, the true goal of philosophy is to discover *the one true worldview*.

This brings us once again to the questions of life. For it is clear that if we desire to find the one true worldview, we must first have some idea about the number and nature of the concepts that make it up; we need to know exactly how many lenses are required for an adequate “pair” of philosophical glasses. Just here is where the questions of life prove so helpful. Why? Because it turns out that *they are philosophically comprehensive*. That is, they express and sum up pretty much the full spectrum of mankind’s religious and philosophical interest. But if this is so, it follows that a full set of answers to the nine questions of life will offer us a comprehensive look at reality. In other words, the questions of life supply the proper framework for any viable worldview. Indeed, this is so true that we may now offer a far more extended and much more useful definition of a worldview: *A worldview is a way of looking at reality as a whole based upon a particular set of answers to the questions of life*. And this implies, of course, that *the one true worldview* is a way of looking at reality as whole based upon *the one set of true answers* to the questions of life.

This characteristic of the questions of life—that it supplies the framework for our worldview—is fabulously useful to a seeker. Above all, it helps him to know exactly what to look for in a given religion or philosophy. For example, if there really is one true worldview—and if this or that particular religion/philosophy is it—then it must answer most, if not all, of the nine questions of life. Moreover, it must do so such a way that each of the nine answers logically *harmonizes* with the other eight, (for how can a true worldview contain answers that are falsified by contradicting themselves). And finally, the answers given by the one true worldview must speak to the deepest fears and longings of a seeker’s heart. That is, in addition to giving him total truth, they must also offer him personal well-being. Indeed, of all the benefits of the one true worldview, this is surely the most important, since it is primarily the quest for personal well-being that animates our search for truth. We see, then, that for many reasons a good understanding of the questions of life will greatly help the seeker to be a shrewd evaluator of worldviews!

Speaking as a bush-league philosopher, I myself have come to believe that the one true worldview is, in fact, the holy grail of all religion and philosophy. As these two age-old disciplines abundantly testify, there is something in man that incessantly longs for the highest, widest, and deepest possible perception of reality as it really is. The questions of life both initiate the search for this vision and point the way. Question by question, answer by answer, we would mount up to that lofty intellectual vantage point from which alone we can at last survey reality as a whole. And again, we aspire to this not only because we desire to *see* reality as it really is, but also because we desire to *relate* to it as it really is. Deep in our hearts we sense that finding the one true worldview is a very special kind—indeed, the ultimate kind—of coming home.

Summing up, on our journey thus far we have unearthed not a little evidence to suggest that man is best defined as a thinking reed—a reed that thinks, above all else, about the questions of life. By their universality, their existential urgency, and their mysterious tendency to inspire an earnest search for the one true worldview, these questions commend themselves as belonging to the very essence of our humanity. And if this is so, a sobering conclusion follows: our *response* to those questions becomes an important measure—perhaps the *most* important measure—of our humanity. In other words, how we deal with the questions of life will in large part determine our success as human beings.

Suppose, then, that someone suddenly awakens to the profound importance of these questions. And suppose that he sincerely desires to respond to them. What then? Well, for starters I would say that he should rejoice: a noble journey—full of purpose and rich with promise—is about to begin. But just as soon as I had extended my congratulations, I would also begin to urge him to get himself into excellent philosophical shape. For as we are about to see, in our seemingly messy world, the way of a seeker can be hard.

A World Full of Contradictory Answers

Perhaps as never before, there is a world of philosophical diversity right at our doorstep. Whether in our neighborhood, school, or place of work, we have all met people who relate differently to the questions of life. Some think about them much, others very little (or so it may seem). Some are confident about their answers, others tentative. Some are vocal about their conclusions, others private. Most importantly, some hold one point of view, some hold others. *Lots* of others!

This situation should give us pause. Yes, as adults we have grown accustomed to such diversity, and have (for the most part) mastered a set of social rules by which we can deal with it fairly comfortably. But imagine for a moment that you are now encountering it afresh, as you first did when you were a child. It comes as quite a shock, does it not, to realize that the people around you—including even your closest friends and relatives—do not view the world in the same way? Indeed, is it not disturbingly evident that something is seriously wrong? Surely we all *ought* to agree; yet it is painfully evident that we do not. To look this philosophical situation straight in the face is to see immediately that it is scandalous.

As he begins his search for truth, an adult will often experience the scandal anew. It is deeply troubling to him, for now he realizes with fresh force that corresponding to his heart full of questions there is *a world full of contradictory answers!* Suddenly, as if to mock his newborn desire for truth, conflicting viewpoints are seen popping up everywhere! Moreover, these viewpoints are usually trumpeted—and sometimes even enforced—by men and women who seem to be more intelligent, more educated, more prestigious, and ever so much more confident than he. A mad falcon indeed!

Let me illustrate this point by again citing from my own experience with regard to the question of the ultimate reality.

From my tender years and right up to the present I have repeatedly encountered teachers who concur with the late Carl Sagan, boldly asserting that the physical cosmos is all there is, was, or ever shall be. This is the view of the *philosophical naturalist*. However, as a student of Eastern religions I was taught on the highest authority that the so-called physical universe is, contrary to all appearances, a dream: a spiritual phenomenon, a manifestation of Big Mind. Here is the view of the *pantheist*. However, in still other venues I have had people assure me over and over again that the ultimate reality is an infinite personal god; a god who formerly created and presently sustains the universe; a god who is metaphysically separate from the world, yet remains intimately and intricately related to it. This is the view of the *theist*. And what is true about the answer to the first question of life is just as true for the answers to all the rest: naturalists, pantheists, and theists cannot agree on a single one!

Now this vexing state of affairs raises an important philosophical question, one of great concern to the seeker whose heart burns for truth about ultimate issues. Is our world in a state of spiritual and intellectual chaos? Does the multitude of contradictory answers prove that there are no answers at all? Or could it be that upon closer examination the apparent chaos reveals a hidden order and purpose beneath the troubled surface of

things? To ask this question more picturesquely, does the unsettling fact of religious and philosophical diversity show that life is a *mess* or a *test*?

Before cutting the falcon in two, we had better try to find out.

Life: A Mess or a Test?

In a world full of competing answers to the questions of life, some people have always concluded that life is a mess. We remember, for example, the ancient Greek skeptics and sophists, or the famous 16th century French essayist, Montaigne, whose motto was, “What do I know?” But if we look at the big picture—scanning, say, the last 2500 years of Western Civilization—we realize that skepticism has not been the dominant philosophical mood at all. To the contrary, the vast majority of philosophers, theologians, scientists, and artists were quite confident that they could know what is universally true, beautiful, and good. They may have disagreed in their representation of these realities, but all concurred that the realities are indeed real and that man is meant to know them.

Until today. Today the dominant mood—at least in the West—is indeed one of philosophical skepticism. As we shall see later, this condition is traceable to a number of causes: a rejection of divine revelation as a viable doorway to truth; the failure of modern philosophy to arrive at a compelling vision of truth; the influential writings of various postmodern (i.e., skeptical) philosophers; and an ever-shrinking, electronically connected world, in which the striking diversity of man’s religious and philosophical outlooks is more or less continually “in our face.” For these and other reasons, truth has truly fallen upon hard times. Moreover, this is not happening only among the intelligentsia. According to Mr. Gallup, 66% of Americans now agree with the statement, “There is no such thing as absolute truth.”

Here, then, is the “postmodern mind” in a nutshell: objective truth and moral absolutes simply do not exist. And as Mr. Gallup just told us, many today have embraced this mind. This is why we often hear people say, “It may be true (or wrong) for you, but it’s not for me.” Or, “If it works for you, good. But it doesn’t work for me.” This is why postmodern philosophers tell us that “truth” is relative to the language, history, culture, and even the biology of the people who hold it. It is also why they now refer to the great systems of philosophy and theology as “all-encompassing stories” or “meta-narratives.” Such stories, they say, have no basis in reality, but are mere verbal constructs by which the human animal seeks to give meaning to the meaningless, to impose order on chaos, and to gain power over one’s neighbor. For them, “truth” is not really truth, but *ideology*; it is an opiate

for the muddled masses, and a cattle prod and a cudgel in the hand of the oppressor.

This perspective—which I will call *the mess perspective*—generates an ethic all its own. The new ethic asserts that in the past particular religions and philosophies may have had some survival value, but that in today's shrinking, volatile, and dangerously armed world we dare not take them too seriously. Indeed, the best solution is that we all should “come of age,” exchanging our childish fantasies of moral and philosophical certainty for the hard currency of peaceful coexistence. Let us therefore abandon our quest for trustworthy answers to the questions of life. Let us surrender our hopes of ever finding the one true worldview. Let us simply bow uncomprehendingly before the great mystery of being. Let us live and let live, tolerating each other's stories and never again trying to force ours upon anyone else, whether by physical might, reasonable argument, or passionate persuasion. In short, however disappointing or frustrating it may seem, let all the family of man now accept and get used to the fact that life is a mess.⁴

In the pages ahead, we will examine the postmodern viewpoint in greater depth. Here, however, I want to propose a different and far more encouraging take on mankind's religious and philosophical diversity. I call it *the test perspective*. According to this view, life is a test set before us by an “unknown god.” He himself has put the questions of life into our hearts, as well as an abiding hope of finding the answers. But for wise reasons he has not made those answers self-evident. Unlike the questions themselves, the answers are not innate; they are not planted within. Moreover, he has allowed a certain amount of religious and philosophical error to creep into his world, thereby setting the stage. What will his human creatures do now? Will they listen to their hearts and begin sorting through the various philosophical options till they find the truth? Or will they use the existence of options as an excuse not to seek truth but to do what they want? As each of us decides, the unknown god is watching. If we seek, he will help us. If we find, he will reward us. The test is on. Our part is as simple as it is important: we must love the truth enough to seek it, and we must keep on seeking it until we find it.

Signs of a Test

Most folks would probably agree that this is indeed a more hopeful way of looking at life in a philosophically diverse world. They would like to know, however, if there are any good reasons to believe it is true. I believe there are. Indeed, I seem to see the signs of a test all around us. Let us therefore pause to consider a few of the most important here.

Natural Hunger and Thirst

The first sign is the familiar mystery of *natural hunger and thirst*. In the natural world there is obviously an objective reality that corresponds to our hunger: food. Similarly, there is an objective reality that corresponds to our thirst: drink. Observe also that we often have to seek out food and drink, and can usually find them if we want them badly enough. Do these simple facts of daily life have a message for us? Is the natural world teaching us something important about the spiritual? Does our hunger for truth correspond to an objective reality? In other words, does it imply that objective truth really exists? And does it imply that objective truth will supply spiritual nourishment, refreshment, and pleasure if and when we seek it out and find it?⁵

The Telltale Make-up of the Human Mind

The second sign that life may be a test is equally familiar and equally mysterious: *the telltale make-up of the human mind*. How is it that we are all endowed with such amazing faculties as thought, language, intuition, reason, and conscience? How is it that we are free to train these faculties on the questions of life? How is it that many of us do so with a spirit of intellectual curiosity, a sense of existential urgency, and a fragile yet persistent confidence that solid answers may indeed be found? Also, how is it that we are surrounded by other minds, with whom we may seek, discuss, and debate the possible answers, if we so desire? Viewed from one angle, it certainly looks as if mankind has been *equipped* for a search for truth. The tools are in us and around us. Our part, it would appear, is simply to use them.

The Manageable Messiness of the Religious/Philosophical (R/P) World

To appreciate this sign, we must dig a little; but once having seen it clearly, it does indeed seem both real and impressive. The idea here is that the R/P world is not nearly as messy as our postmodern friends would have us believe. Indeed, upon close inspection we find that it is actually quite simple and orderly.

We have already seen, for example, that *the questions of life are relatively few and easy to understand*. Quantitatively, nine questions are hardly overwhelming. Qualitatively, they are readily understood by virtually everyone: children and youth ask them all the time, even if we adults cannot answer them all the time.

Also, *the possible answers to the questions are few and easy to understand.* For example, to the question, “What happens when we die?” religion and philosophy repeatedly return to three basic options: the lights go out (the view of naturalism), the soul reincarnates (the view of pantheism), or the soul goes immediately to heaven, purgatory, or hell (the view of theism). We may not like some of these answers, or find them equally plausible, but no one can say they are too numerous or difficult to comprehend. And what is true for the question of the after-life is true for all the other questions as well.

Of special interest is the fact that *the possible worldviews are VERY few, and also fairly easy to understand.* Now at first blush, this statement might sound absurd, since we all know that our world veritably overflows with religious and philosophical systems. However, what many people do not realize is that these systems, like plants or animals, can easily be *categorized*. The basis for the categorization is the response that each system gives to the question of the ultimate reality. And as we saw earlier, in the end there are really only three viable views of the ultimate reality. According to the naturalist, the ultimate reality is matter, or, in the jargon of modern physics, the “time-space-energy/matter continuum.” According to the pantheist it is “Big Mind”—an impersonal divine Spirit. According to the theist it is God—an infinite personal Spirit. *Thus, in the end there are really only three basic worldviews.* And for a seeker overwhelmed with worldview options, that is good news, indeed!

Let me illustrate the great usefulness of this characteristic of worldviews. Suppose you are a college student. Over the course of your undergraduate education you are asked to read the writings of Thales, Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius, T. Hobbes, D. Diderot, C. Darwin, T. and J. Huxley, L. Feuerbach, K. Marx, V. Lenin, J. Stalin, Mao Tse Tung, J. Dewey, S. Crane, J. London, B. Russell, S. Freud, J. P. Sartre, A. Camus, B. F. Skinner, I. Asimov, C. Sagan, S. Gould, and R. Dawkins. Along the way you learn that some of these men called themselves *atomists*, others called themselves *materialists*, and still others called themselves *dialectical materialists*, *communists*, *existentialists*, or *secular humanists*. Sound confusing? It’s bound to—until you realize that all embraced the same basic worldview: naturalism.

Or again, suppose your studies bring you into contact with the teachings of Gotama, Lao Tzu, Heraclitus, Plotinus, B. Spinoza, C. Berkeley, G. Hegel, A. Schopenhauer, R. Emerson, H. Thoreau, W. Whitman, Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, J. Krishnamurti, A. Watts, H. Hess, J. D. Salinger, S. Peck, K. Wilber, D. Chopra, or G. Zukav. You then learn that some of these men called themselves *Hindus*, others called themselves *Buddhists*, and still others called themselves *metaphysical idealists*, *New Agers*, or *cosmic humanists*. And

this too could look pretty intimidating—until you realized that all these thinkers embraced the same basic worldview: pantheism.

Or again, your education may introduce you to the thought of Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Mohammed, Anselm, T. Aquinas, M. Luther, J. Calvin, B. Pascal, I. Kant, Voltaire, J. Rousseau, C. Wesley, B. Warfield, Baha'u'llah, F. Dostoyevsky, A. Solzynitsin, F. Schaeffer, and C. S. Lewis. Along this road you learn that some of these men called themselves *Jews*, others *Christians*, and still others *Muslims*, *Deists*, *B'hai*, etc. Yet despite all the apparent diversity, every one of them would gladly affirm that they embrace a theistic worldview.^{6, 7}

Now it is true that down through the years a handful of philosophers and theologians have proposed still other views of the ultimate reality.⁸ Such thinkers, however, constitute a very small minority. The conclusion, then, is that on the surface of things the R/P world does indeed look fairly messy. If, however, we take time to investigate beneath the surface we find a surprising and intriguing simplicity. *We find that there are really only three basic worldviews, each revolving around one of the three basic answers to the question about the ultimate reality.* Such knowledge is most helpful to a seeker, since it greatly reduces his worldview options, simplifies his search, and focuses his attention on the ultimate philosophical question: the nature of the ultimate reality.^{9, 10}

The Internal Coherence of Worldviews

We turn now to still another sign of the manageable messiness of the R/P world, a sign that I have already touched on, but one that here merits special attention. I have in mind the fascinating philosophical fact that our assumptions concerning the nature of the ultimate reality will necessarily shape the answers that we give to the other questions of life. In other words, in any coherent worldview, the answers to the questions of life are *logically related* to the view of ultimate reality presupposed. Indeed, we may fairly say that a given understanding of the ultimate reality will *generate* a particular set of answers to all the other questions, and therefore determine the essential character of the resulting worldview.

To illustrate this important point, let us look again at naturalism.

For the modern philosophical naturalist, the ultimate reality is the time-space-energy-matter continuum. There is no god. Accordingly, the universe cannot have a “true” or “absolute” beginning. That is, it cannot have come into being out of nothing, for it is inconceivable that something should come from nothing. Therefore, on naturalistic premises, the universe *must* be eternal, as indeed most naturalists teach. Moreover, since there is

no god or divine creator, we may be sure that there is no heaven or hell, no angels, no human or animal spirits, and no supernatural life force animating nature. Where would such spiritual realities come from, if not from a spiritual creator? Thus, the naturalist's view of the ultimate reality profoundly shapes his idea of the beginning.

Similarly, in the naturalistic universe we cannot say that anything "went wrong," since there is no god or creator to define what is normal or abnormal, natural or unnatural, right or wrong. In other words, for the naturalist "evil" does not really exist, and suffering and death are simply part of the way things are. Many things may be painful and unpleasant, but nothing is "wrong" or "went wrong."

And what of salvation? Well, on naturalistic premises it is certain that we cannot look to a non-existent god for help. Therefore, unless visitors from outer space arrive to assist us, we have but one hope: ourselves. That is, through the wise use of science and technology, we must become our own saviors. How far we can go in rolling back (what people call) evil, suffering, and death no one knows. It is, however, all but certain that whatever our gains, they will only be temporary since the Second Law of Thermodynamics assures us that our earth, sun, galaxy, and universe must finally return to dust. Yet even this is not too great a concern, for when our (spiritless) human body dies, the lights go out once and for all. We will never see anyone or anything again.

And what of the meaning of human life? Obviously, there is none, since a transcendent purpose in life can only be found in a transcendent purposer: namely, god. If, then, naturalistic man is to have a purpose, he must become his own god by heroically *creating* one for his own existence, as indeed certain existentialists have urged. Much the same is also true concerning the moral standards by which man is to live. Since there is no divine lawgiver, no absolute moral laws can exist. Therefore, for survival's sake, man must *create* his own set of standards by which the race can go along and get along until the bitter end.

More could be said, but I think my point is clear. Worldviews are *orderly* intellectual constructs. Like planets revolving around the sun, their answers to the questions of life revolve around their understanding of the ultimate reality. Indeed, as we have just seen, their understanding of the ultimate reality actually generates, or at least profoundly shapes, these answers. Again, this characteristic of worldviews is most helpful to seekers. It shows them that the R/P world is simple, reasonable, and orderly—and also that they are wise to think long and hard about the nature of the ultimate reality!

So then, is life a mess or a test? This is a question every seeker must answer for himself. For my part, I judge that the evidence for the test

perspective is weighty. It includes the lesson of natural hunger and thirst, the telltale makeup of the human mind, and the surprisingly manageable messiness of the R/P world. Yes, at first glance this world looks pretty chaotic. But upon closer examination we find that it is rich with order

THE PROBATIONARY ORDER

I. A SPIRITUALLY EQUIPPED HUMAN BEING...

- A. Intuition
- B. Reason
- C. Language
- D. Community and communication
- E. Conscience
- F. Hope

II. CHALLENGED BY THE QUESTIONS OF LIFE...

- A. Innate questions
- B. Curiosity about the answers
- C. Existential urgency

III. IGNORANT OF THE ANSWERS...

- A. The answers are not within
- B. To find them we must look without

IV. SITUATED IN A MANAGEABLY MESSY RELIGIOUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL WORLD...

- A. The questions are few and easy to understand
- B. The possible answers are few and easy to understand
- C. The possible worldviews are *very* few and easy to understand

V. AND FREE TO SEEK THE TRUTH OR NOT!

Let the Test begin!

and design, so much so that it seems far more appropriate to call it a maze than a mess.

A maze, however, requires a maze-maker. It demands *a person with a purpose*, someone who is watching from without, or perhaps even waiting within. What I am suggesting, then, is that all the signs we have just discussed point to the existence and activity of a divine Person, an unknown god. He is the one who plants hunger and thirst for the truth in our hearts. He is the one who spiritually equips us to seek it out. He is the one who has ordered the R/P world in a manageably messy way. And if all this is so, one thing more becomes crystal clear: he has placed us all in a *probationary order*. In other words, the unknown god is putting us to a test: a test of our love of the truth.

Children, Stay Busy!

In order to understand the idea of a probationary order better, consider the following parable.

Suppose that one fine morning a group of third graders enters their classroom and takes their seats. As they sit down, each student notices on his desk a wooden puzzle frame, emptied of its contents. The empty frame has slots for nine wooden puzzle pieces. Beside each frame there is a small pile of about thirty pieces. As the students look around the room, they realize that the teacher is not there. Nevertheless, she has left a note on the board:

**Good morning, children.
I'll be back in a few moments.
Please stay busy at your desks until I return.**

What will the children think? What will they do? What would *you* think and do? I ask these questions because the elements of this scenario correspond fairly closely to the human condition as seen through the test perspective.

Corresponding to the empty puzzle frame is our innate capacity for a worldview, our capacity for a coherent and beautiful picture of reality as a whole. There is, you might say, a worldview-sized frame on the desk of every human heart, just waiting to be filled.

Similarly, the nine slots in the wooden puzzle correspond to the nine questions of life. They represent nine empty holes in our understanding of reality. They are nine intellectual and spiritual voids waiting to be filled by a vision of truth, so that we can see and enjoy the big picture that we intuitively know to be there.

The thirty or so puzzle pieces stand for the possible answers to the questions of life, answers that “pile up on our desk” as we interact with a world full of naturalistic, pantheistic, and theistic options.

As for the situation in which the children find themselves, it too corresponds quite closely to ours. They do not know if the pile of thirty puzzle pieces contains the nine they need; similarly, we do not know whether a world full of conflicting answers contains the true answers we need. Also, the children do not know why there are more pieces than they need; similarly, we do not know why there are so many possible answers, some of which *may* be true, and some of which *must* be false.

There is, of course, one (important) point at which our analogy breaks down: the children know they have a teacher. Indeed, she has left them specific instructions on the board, even if they are a bit cryptic. It is, then, highly probable that they will quickly take counsel among themselves, size up the situation, and “stay busy” working on their puzzles. True, a few may not get the message—or want to get it—and will therefore take up activities more to their liking. Most, however, will work. They know the teacher is coming back soon, and they want to be ready when she does.

As I said, at this point our analogy breaks down, yet in a most illuminating way. For while the children all know they have a teacher who has arranged this interesting situation, many of us who have entered the classroom of life have never paused to consider whether or not a divine Teacher might have arranged it as a kind of test. This is, of course, the perspective—or shift in perspective—that I am very much trying to encourage here. For as soon as you experience this shift, you see immediately that a divine Teacher really does exist. You see that he really has put a puzzle on every desk, and pieces beside every puzzle. You see that he really has written instructions on the board, better even than those given to the children in our parable. And because of all this, you know exactly why you are here and what you are supposed to do.

In short, you are well on your way to discovering the meaning of life!

Blessings of the Test Perspective

The thought of our being on probation can be intimidating, for it is only natural to wonder what will happen if we fail the test. However, the same thought can be profoundly encouraging, since it means that while our life in this world may indeed be philosophically burdensome, it is definitely not absurd. Indeed, when viewed from within the test perspective,

a previously messy life is suddenly revolutionized, charged with *meaning*, *adventure*, and *hope*.

The meaning of life—or at least its first and foremost meaning—is clearly to take the test successfully. It is to seek, find, obey, and enjoy the truth—the unknown god’s truth—about reality as a whole.

The adventure of life is to overcome every obstacle standing in the way. And surely there will be some obstacles, since a test is not a test unless there are difficulties. On the other hand, surely those difficulties can be overcome, since a test is not a test unless it can be passed. Here, then, is yet another blessing of the test perspective: by encouraging seekers with the possibility of success, triumph, and ultimate reward, it lifts their lives out of the realm of the absurd and into the realm of adventure.

As for hope, it has now become manifold and rich. If we really are on probation, it means that we really *can* find true answers to the questions of life; that we really *can* find the one true worldview; that our spiritual hunger and thirst really *can* be satisfied, and our deepest fears and concerns laid to rest. Indeed, it may even be that we can meet the divine Tester at the heart of the maze, and there receive both commendation and reward for a test well taken and a job well done!

Yes, the test perspective can revolutionize our whole outlook on life in this world, turning a mad falcon into a loving friend. But are there any other reasons to believe that an unknown god really exists, and that he really is putting us to the test?

Happily, the falcon is still overhead. Let us follow her a little farther and see.

HINTS OF A HEAVENLY HOPE: NATURE

ON THE FIRST leg of our journey we discovered that the human condition—religiously and philosophically considered—looks curiously organized, designed, and purposeful. It looks like a test. But if our life really is a test, there would have to be a divine tester—an “unknown god”—working in our hearts and our world, putting us on probation. To the spiritually hungry, such prospects bring great hope. If an unknown god is indeed putting us to a test, then surely he can enable us to pass it; surely he can reveal to us the answers to the questions of life, as well as satisfy the spiritual longings and anxieties associated with them. In short, for earnest seekers, the very real possibility that we live in a probationary order is a welcome *hint of a heavenly hope*.

These folks would like to know, however, if there are any other such hints, any other indications that there really is an unknown god who is testing our love of religious and philosophical truth. I believe there are; indeed, I believe there are a great many. However, at this stage of our journey it is best to focus on two in particular: nature and conscience. In the next chapter, we will deal with conscience. Here we will deal with nature, or what is often called “the natural order.” As we are about to see, both of them are big topics, and fabulously rich with hints of a heavenly hope!

Spiritually Significant Characteristics of the Natural World

By *nature* I mean the universe, life, and man; or rather, the distinctly *physical* side of the universe, life, and man. In other words, my focus in the pages just ahead will be on what most folks call *the physical* world (but what pantheists call the *phenomenal* world). In examining this world, we will look at three of its most fundamental characteristics: dependency,

order, and man-centeredness. As we are about to see, each one is chock full of spiritual significance; each one supplies us with *many* provocative hints of a heavenly hope.

Dependency

We begin our examination of nature with a look at one of its subtler characteristics: *dependency*. The idea here is that nature, in manifold ways, clearly *relies upon something beyond itself* in order to be what it is, something *spiritual*. It is quite impressive to see the many different ways in which this is so.

Existence

Consider first the most immediate characteristic of the natural world: its existence. When we scan the starry vault of heaven, or pause before majestic mountains, or delight in beautiful flowers and wild animals, it is only natural for us to wonder just how these things got here and why they continue to exist. If proof were needed for this, one need only to consider the case of little children who—sometimes to the chagrin of their parents—vocalize such wonder and ask such questions all the time. They do so, I would argue, simply because they are human, and because all humans, standing before the mighty edifice of nature, are innately aware that *the things of this world cannot explain their own existence*. Did the rose create itself? Did the robin call herself into being? No, the existence of such individual things self-evidently depends upon something beyond themselves. Furthermore, we know intuitively that the “something” cannot be nothing, for nothing cannot create or sustain anything. So then, the “something” must be a *super* something; that is, it must be something transcendent, something non-physical, something spiritual—something bigger, older, smarter, and more powerful than anything *in* the universe, or even than the universe as a whole. In short, the something must be a spiritual supreme being—the being who brought all lesser beings into being, and now upholds them in being. This being is the independent one upon whom all depends; the uncaused cause of a caused cosmos; the giver of the gift of existence to all that is. True, little children do not typically express their wonder in the kind of philosophical language I have just used. But poets and philosophers do. And I would argue that they do so precisely because they themselves are still children at heart, striving to articulate a hidden wisdom that is lodged deep within every person, whether young or old. The message of the hidden

wisdom is simply this: A physical world that is, points to a spiritual supreme being who formerly *caused it to be*, and who even now *causes it to be here*.

Cohesiveness

Next, we have the cohesiveness of nature. Whether we think of a molecule or a galaxy, a pebble or a mountain peak, a butterfly or a human brain, all physical beings manifest this fascinating property: at least for a season, they cohere or hold together in a given form and at a given density. As a rule, this cohesiveness does not strike us as particularly noteworthy, but modern physics has told us that it should. Today we know that even the smallest physical objects contain enough compressed energy to blow whole cities sky high! But how could such explosive power have been tamed into existence as a humble, ongoing, physical thing? And how can it *continue* to exist as a cohesive physical thing? Certainly the object's underlying physical energy does not perform this two-fold miracle. What, then, does?

The mystery of cohesiveness becomes even more intriguing when we focus our attention on living beings. According to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, the natural tendency of *all* things is to dissipate energy and therefore decay, or lose physical integrity. Living beings supply a real time illustration of this fundamental truth. When an animal dies, its tissues quickly turn into formless dust. In other words, at the moment of its death a hidden principle of cohesion departs, a principle that *grew* the body and *held it together* in its unique form all throughout the course of its life. But what is this principle? Well, whatever it is, it is not material in nature, since according to the Second Law of Thermodynamics matter left to itself only decays. It must, then, be spiritual. Moreover, this spiritual principle must be both powerful and intelligent, since it lays hold of lifeless matter, organizes it, and animates it, thus enabling the living being to swim upstream against the current of the Second Law until the day of its death. Could it be, then, that living beings cohere and endure because they are held in the hand of a living god?

Motion

Spiritual dependency is also exhibited in the motions of things. Pretty much everywhere we look, things are moving. In fact, even things that appear to be stationary are really moving, if only at microscopic levels. But *why* do they move? Intuitively, one feels that they should be at rest; that rest is the natural state or condition of things. Indeed, the Second Law of Thermodynamics declares that this is exactly where all things are headed:

towards absolute rest; the perfect stillness of the grave, brought on by a gradual loss of all kinetic energy. Thus, motion and the Second Law of Thermodynamics raise some important philosophical questions: How did moving things get moving in the first place? And what keeps them moving? Again, the cause cannot be the things themselves. But if that is so, then only one alternative remains: Something—or someone—must have *set them in motion*, and must also be *keeping them in motion*. So again—this time before the mysterious phenomenon of motion—we encounter a powerful, omnipresent supreme being; a being whom Aristotle glimpsed when he referred to the unknown god as “The Unmoved Mover.”

In passing, it is well worth noting that certain peculiarities of cosmic motion point rather dramatically to a Prime Mover. For example, according to the modern nebular hypothesis, our solar system was “created” when gravity acted upon a swirling cloud of gas and dust so as to produce the sun, its several planets, and their 72 moons. Astronomers know, however, that this popular view is beset with grave difficulties. For example, on this premise all the planets should spin in the same direction: in fact, three rotate backwards. All the moons should orbit their planets in the same direction: in fact, eight or more orbit backwards—and Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune all have moons orbiting in both directions! Moreover, all the moons should orbit in their planet’s equatorial plane: in fact, many are in inclined orbits. Such anomalies are significant. Not only do they frustrate the nebular hypothesis, but they also unveil a divine creator who reminds of us his presence, power, and sovereign discretion through the things—and the motions of the things—that he has made.¹

Life

More than any other kind of being, living beings exhibit spiritual dependency. What is it that causes a living being to grow, cohere, move, eat, reproduce, work, play, etc.? What is it that keeps its heart pumping blood, its lungs drawing air, or its brain organizing the raw data of sensation into meaningful perceptions of the world? The reply of the naturalist is: chemically generated energy. But this view frustrates common sense. Yes, most of us are prepared to admit that organic life *involves* chemicals and energy in special arrangements and activities. But few of us will admit that this is *all* it involves. When, for example, we observe our pet cat stalking a bird, or arching its back beneath our outstretched hand, or circling our feet at dinnertime, we do not naturally ascribe the motions of her body to firing synapses and twitching muscles. No, we ascribe them to a *metaphysical* principle animating the cat, whether it be her soul or something beyond

her soul. This is the intuitive view of life—that it “rides” on chemistry, and takes hold of chemistry, but that it cannot be reduced to chemistry alone. Life, then, is a distinctly spiritual principle or power. When it is present, it turns lifeless matter into a living being. When it departs, it turns a living being into dead matter. In short, living beings depend upon life, life is spiritual, and life therefore points to a living god.

To sum up, we have glimpsed through the dependency of the natural world the hand of an eternal, powerful, and living god; a god who brought the universe into being, keeps it in being, holds it together, sets and keeps its various physical objects in motion, and sets and keeps its living beings in life. Thus, dependency in nature is a very big hint of a heavenly hope.

Order

Once, during the early years of my search for spiritual truth, I thought I saw the face of god himself. The vision occurred on a pier in Santa Cruz, California. Walking along, browsing the merchandise in different stalls, I came to a store that featured seashells. Shrewdly enough, the owner had put the sorted shells into open bins, so that his customers could pick them up and inspect them. On this particular day, I did so with an unusual sense of wonder and awe. As if for the first time, I saw the variety, intricacy, and beauty of the shell's design—not only of their shapes, but also of the various patterns of color printed upon them. Though these shells reposed silently in my hand, the delicately wrought cones, cowries, murex', whelks, nautilus', clams, conches, and scallops all seemed to be shouting aloud: “We have a creator and he is here!” As a young pantheist, I felt as though I were looking him in the eyes.

My experience that day serves well to introduce the second fundamental characteristic of nature: *order*. A short definition of this philosophically rich idea will reveal why order is of outstanding spiritual significance. We meet order, says Mr. Webster, when we encounter *differing objects integrated into a system according to a definite plan*. This excellent definition highlights the main elements of any order. First, there is *multiplicity*—a finite number of different parts or objects. Second, there is *unity*—a perceivable oneness, integrity, or systematic quality that characterizes the multiplicity. Thirdly, there is *arrangement*, the element that creates the unity. Note carefully, however, that any old arrangement will not do. For order to exist, the arrangement must be according to a definite plan. In other words, it must display the fourth element of any order: *design, or rationality*.

This last is, of course, the spiritually significant aspect of an order. When we come upon a multiplicity of objects arranged in an intricate and

beautiful design, we immediately experience an inescapable awareness that an intelligent person with a purpose—a designer—has been on the scene. *Order* implies and reveals *design*; design implies and reveals a designer, *a person with a purpose*. They are a little trinity, so that you cannot have the first without the other two. And when we look at a crystal, a conch, a cricket, a cuckoo, a crocodile, or a chemist, we know immediately and undeniably that the Person who purposefully created them was not human, but divine.

Order in nature is, then, a fingerprint of the divine. But to understand and appreciate this quality more deeply, we must consider several different characteristics of order as it appears in the natural world. As we are about to see, each one lifts up its voice in a unique way to proclaim the existence and attributes of the unknown god.

Pervasive

First, we find that order is pervasive. It is present in the tiniest building blocks of nature—the atomic elements—which are composed of orderly arrangements of protons, neutrons, and electrons.² It is also present in the largest objects in nature: those vast cosmic pinwheels and clouds that we call galaxies and galactic clusters, all of which are composed of orderly arrangements of stars. And it is present in all the objects in between. Great or small, organic or inorganic, all the things that we call things are, in fact, *systems*, orderly arrangements of component parts. Furthermore, these little systems are always part of bigger systems; and the bigger of bigger still, until at last we reach the biggest system of all, the cosmos itself. Order pervades the parts, and order pervades the sum of the parts, or the whole. Could such all-pervasive order have arisen by accident?

Manifold

Secondly, order in nature is manifold. That is, it appears in many different forms. For example, we find order in the *structure* of things, the unique way in which the component parts of a given system are related to one another. Think, for example, of the structure of a spiral galaxy, or of a snowflake, or of the many different kinds of crystals (e.g., isometric, tetragonal, hexagonal, etc.).

Similarly, we find order in the *form* of things: the regular shapes, colors, and symmetries that nature brings to our eyes, helping us effortlessly to distinguish a crow from a crow, or a dog from a dog. Just to see them is to wonder in whose fecund intellect nature's myriad structures and forms were conceived.^{3, 4}

We also observe order in the *motions* of things. The sun, the moon, the planets, the comets, the stars and galaxies—all are set in orderly courses; all obey mysterious, mathematically describable natural laws. Objects upon the earth obey such laws as well, responding in scientifically predictable ways to being hit, hurled, dropped, drawn, spun, repelled, or otherwise moved along. Surely it cannot be without spiritual significance that such laws operate regularly in the physical universe. Do they not point to a rational lawgiver, one who has imposed a fixed, scientifically discoverable order upon the motions of things?

Also, we find order in the *behaviors* of living things. Across many species we repeatedly observe the same basic activities: breathing, drinking, foraging, eating, growing, playing, mating, sheltering, storing, migrating, etc. Can anyone reasonably doubt that other kinds of natural law are at work here, distinctly biological laws that constrain the movements and activities of all living beings? But who laid down these laws, who invented these behavioral patterns? And what, if anything, do they all mean?

As ecologists well know, nature's orderliness also appears in the *relationships* that exist between things. Plants and trees depend upon the sun and the soil. Mice, rabbits, and grasshoppers depend upon the plants and the trees. Foxes and falcons depend on the mice and the rabbits. Bacteria and fungi depend on the waste of foxes and falcons, and also upon the flesh of their dead bodies. Soil depends upon the nutrients that the bacteria and fungi produce from these. And so the complex cycle continues. Moreover, living beings are also symbiotically related to each other for purposes of reproduction, shelter, protection from predators, mobility, guidance, work, enjoyment, and more. And what is true of the earth's ecosystems is true of the cosmos as a whole: it too is an arrangement, a vast network of inter-related and inter-dependent beings. Did this massive skein of inter-dependency really arise by accident, or was it at the hand of a wise, powerful, and omnipresent Person with a purpose?

Complex

Thirdly, order in nature can be quite complex. Not infrequently we see this with the naked eye, especially among living beings. A peacock feather, an asparagus fern, the whorls, ribs, and spires of a crown conch—all inspire us to wonder over the incorporation of such intricate detail into such simple beauty. And what shall we say of the veritable worlds of complexity dwelling within our very bodies: our eyes, ears, and brains? When Darwin thought about them, he trembled.

But even this is not all. For now, with the advent of modern biological research at the cellular and molecular level, our wonder has been elevated to a state of awe. Indeed, I think it quite safe to say that for all practical purposes this new research has *proven* the existence of a superhuman intelligence at work in the cosmos. Of course, most scientists will not admit this publicly, but they all know it is true. Consider, for example, the following excerpts from a newspaper interview with an anonymous American molecular biologist (J), whose work with human DNA is designed to identify genetic controls for diseases:

- J: *I'm a bit like an editor, trying to find a spelling mistake inside a document larger than four complete sets of Encyclopedia Britannica.*
- G: Do you believe that the information (accidentally) evolved?
- J: *George, nobody I know in my profession believes it evolved. It was engineered by "genius beyond genius," and such information could not have been written any other way. The paper and ink do not write the book! Knowing what we know, it is ridiculous to think otherwise.*
- G: Have you ever stated that in a public lecture or in any public writings?
- J: *No, I say it just evolved. To be a molecular biologist requires one to hold on to two insanities at all times. One, it would be insane to believe in evolution when you can see the truth for yourself. Two, it would be insane to say you don't believe in evolution. All government work, research grants, papers, big college lectures—everything would stop. I'd be out of a job, or relegated to the outer fringes where I couldn't earn a decent living.*
- G: I hate to say it, but that sounds intellectually dishonest.
- J: *The work I do in genetic research is honorable. We will find the cures to many of mankind's worst diseases. But in the meantime, we have to live with the elephant in the living room.*
- G: What elephant?
- J: *Creation design. It's like an elephant in the living room. It moves around, takes up an enormous amount of space, loudly trumpets, bumps into us, knocks things over, eats a ton of hay, and smells like an elephant. And yet (in order to work and earn a living) we have to swear it isn't there! ⁵*

Intelligible

Order in nature is also marked by intelligibility. This characteristic is especially important, since it helps us to understand *why* nature is orderly. As we have already seen, the forms, motions, causes, and probabilities of things and events are ordered. Because they are, scientists can understand them. The geologist can describe and categorize crystals in terms of geometric shapes. The biologist can describe and categorize animals, birds, fish, reptiles, and insects in terms of common forms and behaviors. The astronomer can categorize the various kinds of heavenly bodies, and describe their motions, usually in terms of formulas derived from conic sections. The statistician can describe the likelihood of certain events by means of the laws of probability. In short, nature is intelligible because its forms and motions carry the imprint of certain ideal patterns or principles, usually mathematical.

But where exactly do these ideal patterns and principles exist? Yes, they exist in the minds of the scientists who discover them. But surely they existed *before* science discovered them, for nature bore their imprint long before the scientists ever looked upon her face with understanding. The conclusion, then, is that the patterns and principles governing nature exist pre-eminently in the mind of god, who first uses them to shape and control nature, and then reveals them to the minds of men as they study his world.⁶

But *why* does the unknown god want these patterns and principles to be understood? Part of the answer obviously involves their utility: they can help us humans master nature and thereby enrich our lives. But the other part of the answer—and the part that most intrigues me—is even more arresting: nature is intelligible *because the unknown god likes to show—and show off—his intelligence to other minds like his own!* Interestingly, this was precisely the conviction of astronomer Johannes Kepler, who said that God had purposely equipped us with mind and intellect, so that we might “think God’s thought after him.” Through the intricate and beautiful forms, motions, behaviors, and relationships of things, this god would excite the spirits of his human creatures to the contemplation of the most exciting thing he knows: himself! Moreover, he would do so in hopes of moving them to yet another kind of contemplation: the contemplation of the questions of life. For surely the intelligibility of nature hints at the intelligibility of religious and philosophical truth. And if religious and philosophical truth is intelligible, then surely, with god’s help, it too can be found.⁷

Beautiful

Finally, order in nature is characterized by beauty. This is what stopped me in my tracks as I gazed, with wonder and delight, at the seashells on the pier at Santa Cruz. But what exactly is natural beauty? Perhaps the best way to reach an understanding of this mysterious phenomenon is to examine what our *experience* of beauty involves. When we do, we see first of all that beauty involves a measure of order—and often a very high degree of order—in the object observed. Muse, for example, upon a Golden Rectangle, the proportions of which (1x1.62) so delighted the Greek's sensibility that their architects used it in the design of temples. Ponder the form, flight, and iridescent feathers of a hummingbird. Consider the manifold geometry of the interior of a chambered nautilus. Contemplate a 3-D model of a strand of DNA. Why do we find all these little universes so beautiful? It is because their component parts are so harmoniously organized, and because they are organized according to an *idea* or *rational plan* so brilliant that it excites in us both pleasure and admiration.

Here, then, we meet two further components of our experience of natural beauty: *pleasure* in an orderly creation, and *admiration* for the one who created it. But where do such aesthetic feelings come from? Surely not from mere molecules banging around in our brain! No, the pleasure we feel must have a non-physical, or spiritual origin. What's more, a little reflection suggests that in the end this can be none other than *the creator's own pleasure* in his own genius and his own handiwork, graciously breathed into our hearts as we look upon the wonders of his world! The same principle applies with respect to our feelings of admiration: this is nothing less than the creator's admiration of himself—and an invitation to us that we should admire him as well. In short, it would appear that the purpose of beauty in nature is to woo us to the worship of nature's god.⁸

But what of ugliness in nature? Does not this unwelcome interloper refute a spiritual interpretation of beauty? No, it does not, for intuitively we know that ugliness in nature is simply a departure from the beautiful norm. A sand dollar is ugly (though never altogether ugly) because it is not normal—because it has been chipped or defaced by wind and sea. A rose is ugly because its once normal leaves are now wilted, diseased, or torn away. The stereotypical witch is simply a beautiful woman whose nose is abnormally crooked, whose chin is abnormally long, and whose back is abnormally hunched—all because her heart is abnormally wicked. Yes, natural ugliness is problematic, for we cannot understand why deformity has stricken our otherwise beautiful world. But the mere presence of deformity does not cancel the spiritual significance of beauty. For again,

we know intuitively that the beautiful form is the normal form; that these forms exist as patterns and ideals in the mind of a beautiful god; and that one day—god willing—the ideal and the real shall become one.

Down through the years, seekers have probably regarded the orderliness of nature as her single loudest hint of a heavenly hope. It is easy to see why. Order so pervasive, so manifold, so complex, so pleasing and so admirable inclines the human heart not only to acknowledge a supreme being, but also to worship him for his infinite intelligence, artistry, and beauty.

Man-Centeredness

We come now to our third and final characteristic of nature, its man-centeredness. Here I have in mind the striking adaptation of the vast majority of natural things to the sustenance of life, especially human life. Indeed, the more we reflect upon the intricacies of the cosmos, the more we are brought irresistibly to the conclusion that the vast system of nature exists for one fundamental purpose: the physical and spiritual nurture of living beings, and especially of the human race.

There are, of course, many today who resist this conclusion, but the evidence favors it nonetheless. In fact, modern science has uncovered hundreds of phenomena indicating that the earth, the solar system, and the universe itself have all been *fine-tuned* to support life on our planet. We now know, for example, that life could not exist if the sun were a different color, or a different mass, or a little closer to the earth, or a little farther from it. The same is true of the moon: if it were only 50,000 miles nearer, ocean tides would engulf nearly all the earth's land mass twice a day; if slightly farther, life in our stagnant seas would die. Similarly, if the earth's gravity, magnetic field, crustal thickness, oxygen/nitrogen ratios, and water vapor and ozone layers were only slightly different, all life would perish. Which is more reasonable: to say that this manifold fine-tuning arose by mere chance or by the hand of a divine Fine Tuner?⁹

Think also of the abundance of nature's *provision*. Why, for example, are the sun, moon, and stars not only beautiful, but also useful for marking time, guiding ships, moving tides, growing fields and forests, lighting days, warming bodies, and so much more? Why so many fruits, grains, nuts, meats, and vegetables, all so nourishing to the flesh and so pleasing to the palate? Why so many trees for shelter, so many plants for fabric or medicine, so many metals for structures, so much gas and petroleum for fuel or plastic? Why the fantastically serviceable gifts of electricity, radio waves, or nuclear energy? Why so many insects, birds, fish, and animals to enrich us with the fruits of their labor, not to mention the pleasure of

their company? This list could go on, with each new item displaying yet again the benevolence of an unknown god who is concerned not only for the sustenance, but also for the happiness of man.

It is, of course, all too true that nature sometimes displays an evil countenance; that it can sometimes turn against man so as to wound and destroy him through flood, famine, pestilence, storm, earthquake, and more. Here again we confront the troubling reality of “natural evil,” a mysterious principle that disrupts and injures the wholeness of the physical realm. Obviously, its presence in a god-sustained world requires an explanation. Indeed, we have already seen that this is one of the “ultimate questions” that perennially resound in the human heart.

Later on we will consider this problem at some length. Here, however, it suffices to point out once again that the presence of natural evil in the world is not incompatible with the existence or goodness of an unknown god. In part, we see this from the fact that nature’s beneficence towards man is certainly the rule rather than the exception. We also see it in the fact that our innate expectation from nature is of good, not evil. Rarely, if ever, do we hear folks saying, “What went right? Why is there so much goodness, joy, and life in the world?” No, it is only evil that surprises and offends. In other words, it is human nature to view nature as a friend. Friendliness, however, is not a quality that inheres in lifeless matter but in living persons. Is there, then, an unseen Person—a friend to humanity—working through nature, speaking through nature, telling us that he is there, that he cares, and that evil will not have the last word?

Summing up once again, we have found that science confirms what common sense readily believes: nature is anthropocentric, the universe is tailor-made for man. But if it is tailor-made for man, there must be a divine Tailor. Interestingly, not a few modern scientists are ready to affirm this very thing. Dr. Robert Jastrow, for example, states that, “The anthropic principle is the most theistic result ever to come out of science.”¹⁰ Why? Because the anthropic principle gives us a glimpse of a wise, powerful, and benevolent creator; a creator who designed the cosmos with the welfare and joy of his human children in mind; a creator who thereby signals to us that he is here and that his human children do well confidently to seek him out.¹¹

Conclusion

The natural order brings a message of hope to all seekers. Its three main characteristics—dependency, order, and man-centeredness—enable us clearly to discern the existence and activity of a spiritual supreme being. Though at this stage of our journey we must still call him the “unknown

god,” we have found that nature actually tells us quite a bit about him: that he is wise, powerful, and good. Here, then, is hope. For if he is wise, powerful, and good enough to sustain the whole natural order, surely he is wise, powerful, and good enough to sustain a probationary order as well. And if indeed he has created a probationary order—if he really is putting us to the test—then surely he is wise, powerful, and good enough to enable us to pass it.