



# What it means to Know God





# Introduction

Our interest in this series is whether God can be known or not and, if he does exist and is knowable, then how may we truly know him and to what degree. We summarized the debate over God's existence in our last lecture by citing R.C. Sproul's studied observation that "throughout the history of Western Civilization, the issue of the existence of God has not been settled once and for all." Who, we might ask, has never given a moment's thought to whether God exists or not? And why have so many drawn such strong personal conclusions about whether he does or not? Atheists are certain that he does not exist. Agnostics are unsure of his existence. And adherents of the various world religions seem to be dogmatically sure about who he is and what he is like.



# Introduction

But how can anyone know - one way or the other? Author John Blanchard understands the importance of the question *Does God exist?* “This is ***the*** question, and every debate about human life and death, and about the universe in which humanity lives and dies, ultimately revolves around it.” American philosopher Mortimer Adler said that “more consequences for thought and action follow from the affirmation or denial of God than from answering any other question.”

Both sides cannot be right, as Blanchard insists. “Either God exists, or he does not exist. There is no point in looking for a compromise, a kind of halfway house in which both sides can live in agreement. To say that



# Introduction

God *is* and at the same time *is not* is a crass violation of the law of contradiction. The truth must lie on one side or the other – and to dismiss the question as irrelevant or unanswerable changes nothing.”

Where are you on this question? What do you believe? And how did you arrive at your conclusions? What methods did you use? Are you certain that what you believe is true?

Whatever you believe, over your lifetime you have constructed your own worldview, the lens through which you view the world. From this worldview, you move and live, speak and decide, work and play, behave and relate, and interpret the world in which you live.



# Ideas Have Consequences

If our assumptions or presuppositions are mistaken and erroneous, everything that follows in our thinking and doing will be wrong. John Frame argued that “removing God from the world enables human autonomy. And, conversely, if our goal is to be autonomous, then we must either deny God’s existence altogether or convince ourselves that he is too far beyond us to have any practical influence in our lives...If you deny God’s transcendence, his control and authority, then you must believe that ultimate control and authority are vested in the finite world – that is, that the finite world is divine. If you deny the presence of God in creation, then you must believe that God is absent.”

# Dostoevsky on Consequences



**Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881)**

*Dostoevsky by Ilya Glazunov*

*If God doesn't exist,  
everything is permitted.*

- *The Brothers Karamazov*

# Philosopher Blackburn on Consequences

In his new book, *On Truth*, Cambridge philosophy professor Simon Blackburn cautioned: “There is no limit to the size of catastrophe that acting on a false belief can bring about.”



**Simon Blackburn**

1944 –

Fellow of Trinity College  
Cambridge University



# James W. Sire: Worldview Questions

The following 7 basic questions are worth repeating to help us see what our “rock-bottom” answers (our worldview) are about life:

1. What is prime reality – the really real?
2. What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?
3. What is a human being?
4. What happens to persons at death?
5. Why is it possible to know anything at all?
6. How do we know what is right and wrong?
7. What is the meaning of human history?





How Do We Know Anything?





# *Ways of Knowing* by Carl F.H. Henry

- How is it that a person comes to know, to perceive, to understand?
- What are the sources of our spiritual beliefs?
- What method or methods do we use for verification of our beliefs?
- Is religious assertion simply a matter of faith?
- What is the relationship between faith and knowledge?
- “Is faith essentially emotive, volitional, moral or intellectual? Do religious assertions rest on authority, intuition, experience, speculation, or personal preference and prejudice?”



# Prerequisites For Knowledge

1. **The Validity of the Law of Noncontradiction:** this is the foundation upon which all rationality is established. *A* cannot be *non-A* at the same time and in the same relationship. A thing cannot be square and not square at the same time and in the same relationship. Aristotle: “The same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject in the same respect.”
2. **The Validity of the Law of Causality:** every effect must have a cause.
3. **The Basic Reliability of Sense Perception:** how we acquire knowledge of the external world.



# Two Ways To Reason

- **Autonomously:** From the Greek *auto* (self) + *nomos* (law) = **self-law**; “living under one’s own laws; independent” (Liddell and Scott’s Greek Lexicon). “Our own human powers are ultimate when we engage in the process of evaluation...Autonomy means making human judgment and human standards for judgment an ultimate touchstone in one’s life” (Poythress).
- **The Christian Way:** “To listen submissively to the instruction of Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of the universe.” This is the way of submitting to divine revelation.
- Each person has to decide; no one is neutral.





# Mystical Intuition

- Intuition, or **immediate apprehension**, is claimed “to be found in one’s own inner experience as an instant awareness of the religious Ultimate.”
- “Religious mysticism depicts intuition as a way of knowing that contrasts with both reason and sensation, and therefore also with intelligible divine revelation.”
- “Mystics claim that **direct insight** into the invisible world is available through personal illumination as a means of access to the Divine allegedly transcending all ordinary levels of human experience.”
- The religious experience is **unverifiable** by ordinary ways of knowing.

# Problems With Intuition

- This view requires the **suspension of reason**.
- If God is beyond truth, what criterion of truth and error remains?
- A “lapse in self-consciousness can only mean the surrender of any personal knowledge whatever.”
- The mystic is left with no ground for speech about God. Reality cannot be described when it is said to be inherently inexpressible.
- **Common expressions:** “I can feel God.” “It doesn’t matter what God’s Word says, I know this is right.” “I have a special feeling about what God wants me to do.” “God spoke to me about this last night.”



# Rational Intuition

- Scholars such as Augustine and Calvin made the case for *a priori* knowledge on the reality that man is the *imago Dei* (the image of God).
- This view of man is called **preformation** (e.g., “the categories of thought are aptitudes for thought implanted by the Creator and synchronized with the whole of created reality”).
- “God is the source of all truth, the human mind is an instrument for recognizing truth, and the rational awareness of God is given *a priori* in correlation with man’s self-awareness, so that man as a knower stands always in epistemic relationship with his Maker and Judge.”



# Experience/Empiricism

- The empiricists consider **sense observation** the source of all truth and knowledge. All truth is held to be derived from experience.
- “For more than two centuries the modern mind has been empirically oriented.”
- “The modern spirit has opted for empiricism as its way of knowing the externally real world, and the inevitable consequence of this decision is secularity.”
- “Taken by itself, the empirical method provides **no basis for affirming or denying supranatural realities**, since by definition it is a method for dealing only with perceptible realities.”



# How Do You Know A Frog?



Do you understand a frog more on a biological dissecting table or in its natural habitat?



# Nancy Pearcey: *Finding Truth*

- “How can I be sure that **my senses** are telling me the truth?”
- “Empiricism ends by claiming that the only thing humans are capable of knowing is a **succession of sensations** – like a filmstrip running through our heads.” Ernst Mach (from whom we get the term “Mach 1” for the speed of sound) said, “The world consists only of sensations.”
- “Using sensory experience alone, there is **no way to build a bridge from internal mental images to the external world**. We are trapped in the prison house of our minds.”



# Reason

- “The rationalistic method of knowing considers human reasoning as the only reliable source of knowledge.”
- “The underlying assumption of philosophical rationalism is that the **mind of man** – simply in view of its latent potentialities, or veiled divinity, or the human mind’s explicit and direct continuity with the mind of God – **possesses an inherent potentiality for solving all intellectual problems.**”
- Rationalism means that “man in his present condition is able **by rational inquiry to arrive at the whole truth about reality and life.**”
- “Human reason is **not** a source of infallible truth about ultimate reality.”



# John Frame

“Every philosophy must use its own standards in proving its conclusions; otherwise, it is simply inconsistent. Those who believe that human reason is the ultimate authority (**rationalists**) must presuppose the authority of reason in their arguments for rationalism. Those who believe in the ultimacy of sense experience must presuppose it in arguing for their philosophy (**empiricism**). And skeptics must be skeptical of their own skepticism.”



# The Birth Of Philosophies

“Most philosophies are born when someone stumbles on one of the undeniable facts of human experience and then claims to have discovered the ultimate, infallible foundation of all knowledge.”



**Nancy Pearcey**

1952 -

# One Reason To Believe In God



**C.S. Lewis**  
1898 - 1963

“There are all sorts of different reasons for believing in God, and here I’ll mention only one. It is this. Supposing there was no intelligence behind the universe, no creative mind. In that case nobody designed my brain for the purpose of thinking. It is merely that when the atoms inside my skull happen for physical or chemical reasons to arrange themselves in a certain way, this gives me, as a by-product, the sensation I call thought.

# One Reason To Believe In God

But if so, how can I trust my own thinking to be true? It's like upsetting a milk-jug and hoping that the way the splash arranges itself will give you a map of London. But if I can't trust my own thinking, of course I can't trust the arguments leading to atheism, and therefore have no reason to be an atheist, or anything else. Unless I believe in God, I can't believe in thought: so I can never use thought to disbelieve in God."





# Conclusion

“The answer to the question of God has profound implications for our lives here on earth...So we owe it to ourselves to look at the evidence, perhaps beginning with the Old and New Testaments. Lewis also reminds us, however, that the evidence lies all around us: ‘We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere *incognito*. And the *incognito* is not always easy to penetrate. The real labor is to remember to attend. In fact to come awake. Still more to remain awake.’”

- Dr. Armand M. Nicholi, Jr.