BUILDING A PATH TO TRUTH

RESPONDING TO THE SKEPTICAL QUESTION

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RATIO CHRISTI

FAITH & REASON are at odds in our culture. For many, faith has come to mean little more than wishful thinking and blind belief. Such a concept is completely foreign to the pages of Scripture and historical Christianity. As Edward Feser notes, "In short, reason tells us that there is a God and that he has revealed such-and-such a truth; faith is then a matter of believing what reason has shown God to have revealed. In that sense faith is not only not at odds with reason but is grounded in reason."

WHAT IS RATIO CHRISTI?

Ratio Christi, Latin for "the reason of Christ," wants to help reverse this trend of anti-intellectual Christianity. We organize apologetics clubs at colleges, universities, and even for high school groups in order to strengthen the faith of Christian students and faculty and challenge the rampant atheism and secularism on most campuses. Our mission is to fill the intellectual gap, to make Christianity something worth thinking about, both personally and in the public square.

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Years ago, some Christian friends and I visited the nine-sided Baha'i temple in Wilmette, Illinois. The number nine, the highest single-digit number, symbolizes wholeness and unity. According to Baha'i, the world's religions are all in some sense true, and yet Baha'i summarizes and completes them all. So Baha'i uses a nine-pointed star to symbolize its faith, and the architecture of its temple reflects the idea that Baha'i fulfills the truth in all religions.

By affirming all the world's religions, Baha'i reflects the sensibilities of our day—that all the religions are roughly equivalent. But what about the fact that religious doctrines contradict? Christians say Jesus is divine, but Muslims and Jews say not. Muslims, Jews, and Christians believe in one God, but some Hindus believe in many gods and some Buddhists believe in none.

Some people explain away religious differences by pushing them to the edges. One man explained it to me this way: wheat is composed of kernel and chaff. 'Kernel' refers to doctrines all religions hold in common, like the Golden Rule—things worth treasuring. 'Chaff' refers to things unique to specific religions—things fit for tossing into the wind. Of course, religions have their unique beliefs and practices, he asserted, but the differences are only chaff. Christians believe the deity of Jesus and the resurrection, he concluded, but these are chaff. Get rid of the chaff, keep only the kernels, and one will see that all religions agree.

This doesn't work for Christians. Christians think the unique idea, "Jesus is the Son of God and Savior of the world," is a kernel. Indeed, we don't follow Jesus because it's useful, popular, or advantageous to do so; we follow even when it's counter-cultural. We do this because the statement, "Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God," is *true*. St. Paul wrote that Christian faith would be worthless if it weren't true. "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile" (1 Corinthians 15:17). In other words, certain unique Christian teachings aren't negotiable. Without it, Christianity falters. So truth absolutely matters.

But a commitment to truth raises all kinds of questions. Western intellectual history has generally believed in truth. The development of theology, science, and philosophy attests to the value people place on truth. And political events of the last decade, including propaganda around the Russia-Ukraine War, underscore the importance of truth.

Yet truth is suspect today, especially in religion. Since the 1960s, we've felt a nip in the cultural air. Attitudes of suspicion and skepticism are more often the rule than the exception. People doubt the human capacity to find truth. They interpret truth claims as power plays. They hold out as much hope of finding religious truth as they do of meeting the Tooth Fairy at LA Fitness. Some do believe in scientific truth, of course, but everyone seems to doubt the possibility of religious truth. Truth has become politics.

Either explicitly or implicitly, many people today ask the so-called *Skeptical Question:* Since we disagree about so many things—think especially of religious disagreements—do we *really* know what we *think* we know?

A CASE STUDY

Mary grew up in a home that was profoundly hostile to religion. She heard that God doesn't exist. She learned that those who think God *does* exist are uninformed and ignorant. Mary never questioned this. If anything, her skepticism deepened in college. Her philosophy professor taught that Immanuel Kant decisively refuted the arguments for God's existence. Her religious studies teacher denied the miracles in the Bible. Her psychology instructor taught, with Sigmund Freud, that religious belief is "wish-fulfillment." People talk themselves into believing in God because they need a loving God as a security blanket.

After college Mary got married, had a son, and got divorced. Then she met some new neighbors who, it turns out, were Christians. They surprised her. They seemed normal. They talked about all the things her other friends talked about: movies, politics, raising teenagers, and so on. They didn't talk *just* about religion—though occasionally, to Mary's discomfort, the subject came up. But Mary was shocked to learn that her new friends were as bright and normal as she herself. They seemed aware of objections to belief in God, but they didn't find them compelling. Through these friendships, Mary found herself accepting an invitation to attend church. After two years of regular attendance, much thought, and deep soul-searching, she became a Christian.

Mary felt confirmed in her new commitment, but worried about her family's reactions. Mary knew her father would disapprove, and she expected her son, a sophomore philosophy major, would feel offended. But she had to share her decision with them. So she invited them both over one afternoon to break the news. The results were predictable, but still upsetting. As expected, her father, Peter, argued that belief in God is intellectually naive. He launched into a speech arguing that the lack of evidence for Christian belief obligates him to withhold judgment. After all, science proves the idea of God is unnecessary. So intelligent people should reject God's existence!

Mary's son, Will, also thought she made a mistake. But his reasoning differed from his grandfather's. In his view, believing that it's *true* (for all people in all places) that the Christian God exists (and other gods don't) is both intellectually naive and culturally arrogant! But to Mary's surprise, Will also saw his grandfather's insistence on proof for God

as naive. To his mind, both Mary and Peter were wrong to assume that there's anything like "objective truth" out there. Will thought that beliefs about God allow communities to cope with reality. Some groups viewed life through the lens of religion. For these communities, such beliefs are beneficial. But Will himself wasn't going there.

This long conversation disheartened Mary. Her father and son posed powerful objections to her belief. These objections were similar in some respects, but very different in others. How could Mary answer? Was her newfound faith reasonable?

HOW DID WESTERN CULTURE BECOME SKEPTICAL ABOUT RELIGION?

Baha'i teaches that all the world's religions are true. in some sense. Many other people say that none of the world's religions are true. Conflicting religious beliefs push people to ask the Skeptical Question: Since we disagree about so many things, do we *really* know what we *think* we know?

The Nature of Modernist Skepticism

French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) thought about knowledge in new ways, and in so doing he ushered in a whole new era of modern philosophy. Descartes feared *skepticism*, the doubting of all knowledge. So he set about the task of finding certitude in knowledge. By launching this project, Descartes turned the attention of modern philosophers to epistemology, the study of theories of knowledge.

Hoping to avoid skepticism, Descartes decided to set extremely high standards for what would count as knowledge. He designed this strategy: he reasoned that by setting the standards of knowledge very high—the severest test possible—and by finding knowledge that meets those standards, he would be certain to avoid skepticism.

So Descartes proposed a thought experiment, a "worst possible case" scenario, to test his method for knowledge. If Descartes' method could still produce certain knowledge even in the worst of all possible situations, he reasoned he could take it as a final answer to skepticism. So Descartes proposed this test: assume that an all-powerful demon deceives me at every moment. Is knowledge still possible?

Descartes said, "Yes." Even if a terrible demon did his dead level best to deceive human knowers, he reasoned, there is still one thing one can know for sure: "I'm being deceived. If so, then I'm thinking. And if that's so, then I must exist." So even in the worst imaginable situation for discovering knowledge, Descartes thought he achieved certitude regarding one truth: "I exist." This is his famous dictum: "I think; therefore, I am." From

that slender platform, Descartes extended his knowledge to infer knowledge of God and the external world.

Descartes built this knowledge on reason alone, using a method called *rationalism*.[1] Mirroring geometry, rationalism began with absolutely certain starting assumptions and moved logically to absolutely certain conclusions. Descartes adapted this geometry-like, rationalist method to all fields of knowledge. He assumed that one strategy would open the gates to every kind of truth. Skepticism was answered—or so he thought.

But Descartes' ideas did not last. If his method was airtight in producing absolutely certain knowledge, as he surmised, then everyone should reach his same conclusions. But those who followed his method ended up with contradictory conclusions. The method was flawed after all. And so, philosophers began exploring another approach to knowledge. Rather than emphasizing the pure reason of rationalism, these philosophers built their thinking on the senses. This strategy is called *empiricism*.

Building knowledge through the senses seems obvious. How do we know the sun rises in the east? We watch it. But surprisingly, after a long history, the empirical tradition also eventually led to skepticism. A key figure was David Hume (1711-1776). Surprisingly, Hume's empiricism led him, not to knowledge, but to doubt. Like Descartes, he wanted to banish all error. He decided on a strict rule (a very high standard) that all knowledge must be rooted in direct experience. To gain certitude, Hume limited knowledge to the things we can *actually, directly experience.* But this turned out to be a problem: much of what we think we know doesn't actually come directly through our senses. It doesn't meet this very strict standard.

Hume's famous discussion of *cause and effect* illustrates the problem. Imagine a pool table. I see a cue ball rolling. I hear it strike the 8 ball. I see both rolling away at new angles. Now I might think I see the cue ball *causing* the 8 ball to move. But, Hume said, sticking strictly to what I directly experience through the senses, I only actually see isolated events—balls rolling, colliding, making sounds, changing directions. I don't *actually experience* causation.

What we actually observe, then, are isolated events regularly happening at the same time. Two events—the sun's rising and the rooster's crowing—routinely occur together. But, Hume said, we don't directly observe any relation, any essential causal connection, between these isolated events. So Descartes' rationalism led to a skepticism of contradictory conclusions, while Hume's empiricism, rigorously followed, lead to a skepticism of disconnected facts. Neither answered Descartes' challenge, and both arrived at skepticism.

These two philosophical traditions (rationalism and empiricism) failed to achieve certitude. Meanwhile, science enjoyed smashing successes. Isaac Newton (1642-1727) leant credibility to science with his incredible work (like figuring out gravity). When Newton

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1 The terms rationalism and empiricism are very general categories. Not all philosophers represent one of these ideals exactly since most rationalists include some empirical elements in their theories and vice versa. Some, like David Hume, illustrate a more nearly pure form of empiricism.

reflected on his method, he concluded that knowledge is found neither through the rationalism of Descartes nor the empiricism of Hume. Rather, science pulls together ideas of the mind (from rationalism) along with observations of the senses (from empiricism).

Newton's life overlapped a Golden Age called the Enlightenment (roughly 1685-1815), a bastion of modernism. Enlightenment intellectuals shared a central goal: human happiness built on human liberty gained through social progress guided by reason. They dreamt of shaking off the social influence of medieval superstitions and religious traditions. (They thought religion often leads to war.) They hoped for a new, harmonious culture directed by human reason. (They found the Bible full of superstition.) Gradually, as science leaped from one success to another, they saw science as the primary form through which human reason would solve social dilemmas and create a bright future. In fact, by the late nineteenth century, many Western intellectuals believed that science *alone* is the prime example of rationality and the only legitimate cultural authority.

The modern form of the Skeptical Question is often connected with this fascination with science. It often assumes that all knowledge must be supported by science. In fact, some thinkers in this tradition said that believing something without adequate evidence is *immoral*! Under the influence of modernism, the question became: "Do we *really* know what we *think* we know—especially in religion—when our beliefs are not properly based on empirical or scientific evidence?" For religious belief, the implication is plain: without strong proof for God's existence, the rules of evidence require disbelief. Since evidence isn't compelling, it's irrational—maybe even immoral—to believe in God. A modern skeptic like Peter (from the case study) would sum it up this way: since believers can't give scientific evidence for their private, religious ideas, they really shouldn't believe in God.

The Shape of Postmodern Skepticism

Like many who adopt the modern spirit, many postmodern people are skeptical of religion. Yet *postmodernism* arrives at this destination by a different route. Postmodernism is a teeming jungle of varied stances. If it shares anything, it's this: a reaction against modernity, especially the Enlightenment. According to the Enlightenment gospel, an individual—liberated from religious authority and appealing to scientific reason—can discover truth and reach happiness. Similarly, any society can make progress toward human happiness. Postmodernism is a cluster of somewhat varied views that rejects these overly optimistic ideals.

Postmodern philosophy does send important taproots back into the modern era, beginning at least with philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant initially adopted rationalism. But after reading the empiricist Hume, he rejected rationalism, awaking from what he called a "dogmatic slumber." But Hume also posed a problem, so Kant made a decisive shift. While Hume allowed *only the senses* to contribute to knowledge, Kant

argued that *both the senses and the mind* are factors in human knowledge. Specifically, Kant proposed that knowledge arises when categories that preexist in the mind interpret the data of the senses. It's like the mind uses the mail-sorting cubby holes at the Post Office (preexisting categories of the mind) to organize and interpret the meaning of the letters (facts from the senses).

Remember Hume's view of causation: the senses can perceive two events happening simultaneously, but experience never reveals the causal connection between the two events. Experience leaves us with *disconnected facts;* it never delivers the *relations between the facts*. Kant answered this way: the relations between facts (like causation) are categories embedded in the mind. The mind is prewired with empty categories. These are "empty," meaning they contain no information about the actual world. The categories (the cubby holes) stand ready to receive and to organize the facts (the letters) that come via experience. Experience fills the categories with content. Together these two elements produce knowledge. For Kant, causality isn't directly observable; it's hardwired in the mind.

In brilliantly answering Hume, however, Kant planted the seeds of a new skepticism. Before Kant, people assumed that the *world shapes the contents of the mind*. In answering Hume, Kant said that *the structure of the mind shapes our view of the world*. Reality doesn't structure knowledge in the mind; the mind constructs narratives about reality. Kant's reversal produced revolutionary implications. If the mind shapes knowledge of reality (and reality doesn't shape knowledge), then *reality as it is* can't be known. We're left with an awareness of reality *as our minds shape it.*

If we can't have confidence that we know *reality as it is*, this affects religious knowledge. Mary (from the case study) learned in psychology class that our pictures of God are rooted in our human desires and feelings. So-called knowledge of God is actually a projection of human need. This reflects Kant's reversal. It quickly led to the belief that there is no real God who shapes our religious beliefs. God became a human invention. Religious passions manufacture beliefs about God. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) took this bait. He interpreted the idea of God as a psychologically inspired father image. Based on their desire for a celestial security blanket, emotional weaklings fabricate a heavenly father figure.

Kant's revolution took a first step. But postmodernism required another step. That came with the rise in consciousness of culture and language. Kant had assumed everyone thought like him. (Doesn't everyone think like an eighteenth-century Prussian philosopher?) But what if different people in different cultures have different mental categories? This perspective now dominates Western assumptions: the categories in human minds vary as widely as the cultures of the world. The frameworks that communities use to interpret their worlds aren't universal. They're forged by each community's unique way of living in a particular time and place. Their mental categories are grounded in history and tradition. Cultures embed their categories in language. So all people view the world through the unique lens of their own culture and language.

Scholars use the phrase 'linguistic turn' to describe this new sensitivity to the variety of mental frameworks embedded in different languages. English and Swahili aren't just distinct languages; they're radically different ways of organizing the world. To use a computer analogy, one language is Windows; another is macOS. The linguistic turn involves a fundamental shift in how people look at the source or origin of the narratives any person uses to interpret the world.

As part of making the linguistic turn, intellectuals today often renounce *universal reason*. They celebrate a smorgasbord of *particular forms of logic*. They highlight the perspectives of the marginalized. In this context, the Skeptical Question takes a new form. If we define 'knowledge' as *true beliefs about the "way things really are,"* the postmodern world says we have no knowledge at all. We have no knowledge of God; we have no knowledge of the physical world. We have only the narrative that my tribe and I share. This surprising conclusion is central to postmodern skepticism.

Two important thinkers from the 60s have made important contributions that helped lead to mature forms of this postmodern skepticism. Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) was suspicious that language describes truth. He used a philosophical program called *Deconstruction* to make his point. Derrida saw all language as metaphor. Metaphor is figurative language in which one thing is compared to another. For instance, someone might say, "This car is a tin can." Now obviously, *some* language is metaphor. But if *all* language is metaphor, then language always refers to *other language*, and not to *reality itself.* To make this point, Derrida couldn't say *literally* that language doesn't refer to reality (because that statement seems to refer to reality). So he created ironic, playful arguments in which he shared counter-examples, trying to show that there's no completely clear relation, no universal connection, no "correspondence" between language and reality. In Derrida's hands, Deconstruction poked holes in the idea that language conveys truth about reality.

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) added another theme to the postmodern critique. He argued that because our knowledge is embedded in radically different cultures and languages, the very concept of objective truth about a real world is fallacious. So he asked: Why do people *pretend* to pursue truth? What's in it for them? Following an insight from Karl Marx, Foucault said people make truth claims about the world as a strategy for protecting their power. Marx said the rich use the concept of truth to pacify the poor. They oppress the poor by proclaiming, "The social structures that produce your poverty are God's will. Don't revolt against them!" Marx saw so-called "truth" as a tool the rich use to reinforce their power by keeping the poor satisfied in their poverty. Knowledge claims thus amount to aggression. Since we know(!) truth claims aren't about reality, they must be about protecting privilege and power.

Extending this idea, postmodernism tends to interpret comprehensive worldviews (*metanarratives*) as justifications for political agendas. It casts suspicion on the motives of anyone who claims to know any total picture of reality or any model that explains everything (including the Christian worldview.) For postmodernism, skepticism isn't the

unhappy consequence of a failed search for truth. Skepticism, in the form of Deconstruction, is a tool for uprooting power and protecting the downtrodden.

This all shapes the Skeptical Question in its postmodern form. While the modernist skeptic rejects religious knowledge because religion fails to be like science, the postmodern skeptic sees knowledge claims, whether religious or scientific, as instruments of power. The postmodern version of the Skeptical Question becomes: "Do we *really* know what we *think* we know since there's no higher viewpoint beyond *your* perspective and *my* perspective?" A postmodern skeptic like Will (from the case study) would summarize his attitude toward religion in this way: it's naive, arrogant, and an oppressive power move to believe that the Christian God is the one true God.

WHERE DOES SKEPTICISM GO WRONG?

Ideas matter. The attitudes of intellectuals and philosophers work their way into everyday living. For example, I once talked to Alejandro, a skillful lawyer from St. Paul who specializes in suing companies for making defective toys. I asked him about religion. He doesn't believe, though his wife does. (His wife really wants him to believe—things would be smoother at home if he did.) He thinks that if religion works for someone, as it does for his wife, then it's okay to believe. But religion isn't for him.

Alejandro is a typical, contemporary person. He's modern—skeptical about religion, but not about science. (And note: he earns big money doubting everything toy companies say about toy safety). He's also postmodern—relativist, pragmatic, and tolerant. ("If a religion benefits a believer, of course that's fine for the believer.") What account of knowledge offers a reasonable response to Alejandro?

Three Initial Points

First, notice that Alejandro bounces back and forth between modern and postmodern stances. People do flip-flop. Like Alejandro, they can be quite adamant about proving or criticizing certain beliefs, but they hardly blink as certain other beliefs they hold just slide by unscathed. Not everyone fits the historical categories, modernism or postmodernism, perfectly.

Second, skepticism isn't all bad. A restrained and healthy doubt isn't a monster, despite what we may have heard in church. Actually, healthy doubt reigns in gullibility. Remember the Heaven's Gate cultists? They thought if they died by ritual suicide, they would ride to heaven on the tail of Comet Hale-Bopp. Well, they didn't ride the comet. They just ended up dead. They should have doubted their cult leader. A restrained skepticism (over against a global skepticism) can save a person from regret.

Third, if skepticism is flawed, and knowledge is genuine, that doesn't justify intolerance. Many people do assume that if you claim to know truth (especially *religious* truth), then you're *automatically* intolerant. Holding religious beliefs, many suppose, breeds

intolerance. This makes some sense, given Europe's history of religious war. But the inference is flawed. Tolerance is appropriate in a pluralistic society. As a Christian, I believe my atheist friend is wrong, but I support his legal right to hold his view. And vice versa. We both believe in freedom of speech. Believing in truth doesn't mean either of us should be intolerant.

Answering the Modern Skeptic

What is an effective response for Mary's father, Peter, the modern skeptic? Peter doubts God because he thinks that the evidence for God's existence is sub-standard or non-existent. But notice that in the background of his rejection of belief in God, Peter assumes a standard that *knowledge claims ought to meet*. This standard is like a yardstick by which he measures every belief. Generally, people like Peter give little thought to their standard. (Like the fish who doesn't feel wet, we all assume things we rarely question.) So behind Peter's rejection of God's existence is an unexamined standard—a very high benchmark—for what rightly counts as genuine knowledge.

This is a core insight for responding to modernism's rejection of religion: when there's disagreement, it's helpful to explore the reasonableness of the assumed benchmarks for evidence. Various forms of modernism (echoing Descartes and Hume) tend to set highly stringent criteria for what they allow as reasonable religious belief. But are such strict rules of evidence justified?

Many strict modernist requirements for knowledge fail. First, if a modernist's overly strict criteria for knowledge were actually applied consistently, the criteria would rule out much of what we legitimately know. For example, I can't prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the world has existed for more than five minutes (maybe it was created two minutes ago). I also can't prove that I have a mind (I might be a robot), or that I love my wife (I do!). Hume's very strict rule is an example. When followed consistently, the rule implies that we can't know that A causes B. But since we do know that A causes B in some cases, doesn't that show Hume's rule is too narrow? If I do rightly know that A causes B, and the modernist yardstick says I don't, then the yardstick is the problem. Strict criteria do eliminate false beliefs, but they also exclude obviously true beliefs. They're like cancer: growing cells are usually good, but too much growth is bad. So when people adopt strict rules of evidence to be sure they eliminate false beliefs, we can respond that the rules are flawed if they also rule out a lot of obvious knowledge.

Second, following this point, modern skeptics often focus their strict rules of evidence only against religious ideas. But when these skeptics turn to supporting their positive, non-religious ideas, their very strict criteria create problems. For example, some modernists believe so strongly in science that they say (or assume): "Only scientific statements are rational." They use this rule against Christian teaching, as in: "You can't prove God

scientifically." But this move is quicksand. The rule, "Only scientific statements are rational," is too narrow. That rule *itself* can't be proved scientifically either. That's because it's not a *scientific* statement *about the world*, but a *philosophical* theory *about science*. Clearly, we do have knowledge that isn't proven scientifically. This illustrates a key point: it's hard (impossible?) to create standards of evidence that neatly exclude religious beliefs without also eliminating many other ordinary beliefs.

Third, modern skepticism, applied consistently, struggles to provide wisdom needed for life. I've heard modern skeptics express pride that their agnosticism is intellectually virtuous. They imagine themselves to be courageous, not swayed willy-nilly by the winds of contemporary opinion or religious rhetoric. They pride themselves on being more honest because they won't commit to any philosophy of life. They carefully reserve all judgments until absolute certainty presents itself. But living life consistently under such principles of skepticism is impossible. Of course, it's wise, when facing ambiguous evidence, to withhold judgment. But we can't suspend judgment about ultimate questions forever. As existentialism reminds us, sometimes we must act; we must choose how to live, even when absolute proof is absent.

Philosopher William James tells about a climber hiking a steep mountain trial. The climber comes to a crevice, too deep to climb down into and too wide to jump across. Intellectually, the climber has three options: (1) "I can't jump the crevice; it's too wide"; (2) "I can jump the crevice"; and (3) "I suspend belief about whether I can jump the crevice." If the climber is only *thinking about the situation*, then skepticism—option (3)—is clearly available. But what will he do? He can't stand still the rest of his life. He must act; regarding *acting in the situation,* skepticism isn't an option. The climber must choose either (A) jump the crevice or (B) turn around and go home. There's no middle ground.

Think of religious belief. Suppose a woman suspends belief about the existence of God because she judges the evidence is insufficient (option 3). In her life choice, she is in effect rejecting God (option B). Or, if her boyfriend proposes, and she responds, "I don't know," her matrimonial hesitation *functionally* equates to "No"! Contrary to what skeptics think, being agnostic *intellectually* equates to deciding negatively *existentially*. In the words of a rock music group named *Rush*, "If you choose not to decide, *you still have made a choice.*"

Here's the rub for modern skeptics: in response to the Skeptical Question, they set a very high crossbar for knowledge. This allows them to avoid making erroneous knowledge claims by suspending judgment about many things. In so doing, they might carve out tiny, exclusive enclaves of relative certainty. (Maybe this enclave is science?) But this ghetto of certitude is too small for life. It excludes too much. Modernists put the crossbar of knowledge so high that they place in the "I don't know" category many of the things we need to live life. But life must be lived. And so, while the modernist attempt to be rigorous in regard to knowledge is in some ways well-intentioned, there must be a better way.

Answering the Postmodern Skeptic

Does the postmodernism of Will, Mary's son, offer a better path? Undeniably (maybe surprisingly) postmodernism offers multiple helpful insights. For one thing, postmodern persons correctly surmise that the modern obsession with certainty is misguided. Further, they acknowledge rightly that historical and cultural factors do shape how people see the world. And it's worth noting how this affects human interactions of many kinds. Finally, importantly, they understand how knowledge claims can be used as weapons of power for political purposes. The privileged do use knowledge claims against the powerless. It's wise to hone a sensitivity to times where powerful people "control the narrative" to their own benefit.

While these insights are helpful, a full-blown postmodern skepticism takes several serious missteps. First, postmodern protest about the connection between knowledge and power is insightful. But taken too far, it also undercuts postmodernism. The snake bites its own tail. If every single assertion harbors a power agenda, then what agenda is embedded in the postmodern critique? A person once told me, "Every attempt at persuasion is an act of violence." This person apparently failed to see (ironically) that he was trying to persuade me of his point.

Second, culture and language do indeed affect human knowledge-building processes. Sometimes this means that the truth about some reality is less than totally clear, and we should be honest about this. But knowledge of ambiguity doesn't prove that all knowledge is ambiguous.[2] Everyone knows some things are unclear. But this doesn't in the least show that *everything* is unclear. Finding knowledge can be *difficult*, but it doesn't at all follow that attempts at building knowledge are impossible, doomed to failure, or morally inappropriate.

Third, the idea of truth—the commonsense notion that *truth describes a real reality*—is tenacious. Postmoderns like Derrida and Foucault seem to undercut this traditional definition of truth. But we may still ask: In what sense do Derrida and Foucault, with their respective criticisms of this idea of truth, believe their criticisms *are true*? Try though they may, postmoderns can't just cancel the traditional notion of truth without dissolving the platform their own beliefs stand on. It defies elimination and redefinition. For whenever someone goes too far, trying to eliminate or redefine truth, we may always ask: What about *their* argument or *their* definition? Is *it* true in the sense that *this* is the way truth really is?

Fourth, the postmodern analysis of power and its relation to truth is helpful, as stated above. But this too is also often overstated. Foucault built a career on showing how claims to knowledge in various contexts are merely poorly concealed attempts to usurp power or maintain privilege. Let's grant Foucault's insight: knowledge claims *can* rationalize privilege. But the connection between knowledge claims and power doesn't necessarily *prove*

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2 A phrase borrowed from E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967) ix.

or disprove any belief. Noticing that knowledge claims have power implications doesn't help us decide the truth or falsity of any particular knowledge claim. For example, suppose Senator Armstrong says: "I'm the best candidate for president." This has enormous power implications, but does this make it false? No. Maybe Armstrong really is, by some measure, the best candidate. So the interplay of knowledge and power is important, but this doesn't directly show, with any degree of probability, whether any particular claim is true or false.

Finally, postmodern skepticism, at least in certain varieties, assumes the truth of certain key traditional beliefs. Postmodernism goes something like this: "Since all knowledge is rooted in cultures and languages, pure objectivity and certainty aren't possible. All knowledge is subjective. Thus, attempts to proclaim 'The Truth' must be oppressive. Oppression is evil, so we must deconstruct those claims." Now here's the issue: this assumes (*rightly*) that knowledge is connected to culture, that oppression is *really evil,* and that deconstructing oppressive power is *good*. These statements are true. If we're going to stand with the underprivileged, they *must* be true. Saying "oppression is evil" and "deconstructing power is good" doesn't exert power over the underprivileged. Standing up for the underprivileged requires tapping into moral truth.

Here's the rub for the postmodern skeptic: realizing that some people use their rhetoric to gain political influence, postmodern people responded by deconstructing—poking holes in—all truth claims and metanarratives. Postmodern people instinctively see these as naive, arrogant, and oppressive. But that doesn't get us away from all truth claims. Indeed, the greater danger is that *false* claims are used to justify oppression. (And this statement, by the way, is *true*.)

The solution to oppression is not the elimination of truth. The solution is using truth as a bulwark against the oppressive use of power. It's precisely when truth is abandoned that politics and power reign supreme. There's a reason dictators suppress the free press. Yes, we value postmodernism's insights on the relation of knowledge to power. But we still need to know when a metanarrative is being abused (Putin: "We're denazifying Ukraine"). And we can know that only because we know when a metanarrative is true (Zelensky: "Ukraine is fighting for freedom"). Power does drive some metanarratives. Oppression can result. But true knowledge, not its elimination, protects us from tyranny.

HOW CAN WE FIND GENUINE KNOWLEDGE?

The skeptical denials of truth and knowledge run into significant flaws. For a Christian, truth is important. Unlike adherents of Baha'i, followers of Jesus do believe that the truth or falsity of certain central Christian teachings, like "Jesus is the Son of God," is crucial. Christian faith depends on this. Recall again St. Paul's words: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile" (1 Cor. 15:17). Christians don't follow Jesus because faith is useful or beneficial. They follow because Jesus truly is God's one and only Son.

Truth and Knowledge

This brings us to the central mission of epistemology. The crucial goal is twofold: we want to avoid error and find truth. We need to maximize true beliefs and minimize false beliefs.

Note well: both halves of this mission matter. Naïve or credulous persons believe *anything and everything*. They do maximize true beliefs; among the myriad things they believe we'll find a huge number of *true beliefs*. But these true beliefs will be mixed in with so many false beliefs that they're at a loss trying to discern which is which. In the end, the many thousands of true beliefs they do hold won't be available to guide their lives.

Conversely, suppose skeptics believe *nothing*. They will obviously hold no *false beliefs*. But they face the same predicament as credulous persons. They, too, will have no truth by which to guide their lives. And this shows the bitter endgame for strong forms of skepticism. Skeptics are well-intentioned. They start with the noble goal of avoiding error. Fair enough. But this goal must be pursued in concert with the goal of finding truth. When pursued in isolation, the obsession with avoiding mistakes leads nowhere. Without some truth, skeptics have nothing to guide their lives. And yet they must live. So yes; modest skepticism helps us avoid errors. But strong forms of skepticism create more problems than they solve.

Noting the problems with skepticism, however, doesn't help us achieve the other goal

of epistemology, namely, finding true knowledge. So we turn to another question: How may we gain genuine knowledge?

Basic to this project is the difference between *truth* and *knowledge*. Many people equate these two concepts, with chaotic results. Put simply, *truth* or *true affirmations* are defined as assertions that correspond to reality. A statement is true if it properly describes some aspect of the real world. This is the idea of *correspondence*. The idea of correspondence isn't a method for testing truth or discovering knowledge. It defines the word 'truth'; it's what we mean when we say a statement "is true." According to correspondence, *reality* itself is what makes a statement *true*. A statement like, "Granite is heavier than water," is true simply because granite stones sink in water.

Now truth doesn't depend on anyone *knowing* the truth. Even if no one's around to discover that it's 115° on August 15, 2022, at 2:00 p.m. in the middle of Death Valley, it's still true that it's 115° out in that desert. The statement, "It's 115° on August 15, 2022, at 2:00 p.m. in the middle of Death Valley," doesn't require that someone's *thinking* about it. Truth is independent of human minds.

The word 'knowledge' refers to some person's proper comprehension of reality. This proper grasping of reality can be knowledge by acquaintance. In this sense, I know what the color blue looks like by looking at the sky. An accurate perception of reality can also take the form of *knowledge of true statements* that describe that reality. "The sky is blue" is a true statement. Both of these are important. Knowing a person is more akin to knowing by acquaintance, and it's more important than just knowing a statement that describes that person. But knowing true statements is also important. In fact, the two senses of 'knowledge' are related. Knowing by acquaintance implies the truth of descriptive statements. If I know a friend named Greg, it means that statements, like "Greg exists" and "I count Greg as a friend," are true.

For a belief to count as knowledge for a person, it must meet three conditions. First, knowledge is most basically a *belief*. I have to *believe* a claim (I have to hold it as true) in order to *know* it. Of course, believing something isn't enough to *make it true*, and not believing it doesn't *make it false*. But if I don't hold an idea, then it's not knowledge for me. Suppose one of my great-great-grandfathers was a Union Army lieutenant who fought at Gettysburg. Now suppose I don't know anything about him. Then it's obviously still *true* that my ancestor was this lieutenant, but it would be very odd to say that I *know* about him. Many truths describe the universe. I know only very few of them. But for any of these true things to count as knowledge for me, I must believe them.

Second, my belief must be *true*. It's not just that I must *think* the idea is true. The idea must actually *be* true. Members of the Flat Earth Society (yes, there is such a thing!) *believe* the earth is flat. But it's clearly not. So their belief could never count as knowledge. Genuine knowledge is always *true*.

Third, knowledge is true belief *plus some other fact* that legitimates the knower's holding that belief. So knowledge arises out of, or is based on, some "legitimating fact." This

is where things get murky; the exact nature of this "legitimating fact" is debated. But in fact, a fairly wide variety of things can count. For example, suppose I'm unsure about the score of the Twins-White Sox game. If I look up and adjust my belief to what's on the Target Field scoreboard, then I have good reason to accept my belief as true. (This is direct experience.) Or, if a history teacher assures me that WWII ended in 1945, not 1845, I have good reason to accept that as true. (This is testimony from a knowledgeable and reliable witness.) Or, further, if I believe that Smith is the killer and should be convicted of the crime because I saw the security camera video which shows him pulling the trigger, that's good reason, too. (This is evidence.)

Why do we need some legitimating fact? Because it eliminates true beliefs that are true just by chance. It rules out wild guesses that are true by chance. Wild guesses that just happen to be true shouldn't count as knowledge. Say I win the lottery. Before I win, it's true I *hoped* the winning numbers would be 10 83 72 46 95. But it's wrong-headed to say that I *knew* beforehand that these would be the winning numbers! In the lottery, I'm guessing, not knowing. In sum, the word 'truth' refers to statements that appropriately describe the real world. And 'knowledge' refers to a true belief held by a person for some appropriate reason.

Forming and Testing Beliefs

Now this requirement for some sort of "legitimating fact" leads to an obvious question: How do we assess these "legitimating facts"? An answer here would help us find truth and evade error.

Remember that Descartes was obsessed with evading error and doubt. This drove him to posit extremely high standards for the "legitimating fact" that separates true knowledge from lucky guesses. To weed out error, Descartes argued that all candidates for genuine knowledge must arise from a single, correct method. Some call this *methodism*. ('Methodism' here isn't the denomination.) In this approach, gaining true knowledge always requires following a correct method. Descartes chose geometry as this "correct method."

But his approach caused an obvious problem. If methodism were right, then I'd need to know something (the validity of methodism) before I could know anything. My coming to know what method to use would itself require prior knowledge of the very thing I'm looking for. This is contradictory.

We can do better than methodism. We should use *particularism*. Particularism begins with specific examples or clear cases of knowledge. It starts with the many *particular* things we already know and uses them as raw material for more complex knowledge building. Building knowledge, in other words, is like building a house: it starts with raw materials. You can't build either a house or knowledge out of thin air. Particularism admits that while we can certainly doubt *some* ideas, we *can't doubt everything* and expect to make headway.

Remember that Descartes started by doubting everything. He said, "Suppose I know nothing. What would I know *for certain,* even if an all-powerful demon were intent on deceiving me?" We could see his approach to knowledge as a "guilty until proven innocent" approach. His well-meaning desire to avoid every doubt led him to start by discounting every belief and accepting only what he could absolutely prove. But the problem became obvious: starting with doubt, he ended with skepticism.

Particularism takes a fresh start. It adopts an "innocent until proven guilty" approach. Particularism notes that we form true beliefs through a variety of means. We see a tree or hear a train (experience). We learn things from experts or teachers (testimony). We compute things and infer conclusions (reason). We form beliefs by looking at facts (evidence). Particularism views all of these belief-forming processes as normally valid, under usual circumstances. They use "legitimating factors" that can be generally trusted to lead to real knowledge. So when we see something, we don't stop to ask how we know that our vision is perfect; we trust that it is. We consider most beliefs formed through our vision to be true until proven otherwise ("innocent until proven guilty"). Of course, we do sometimes make mistakes, but we have ways of discovering and weeding out these mistakes. So, over time, starting with clear cases as the raw materials of knowledge, we gradually expand what we know.

Now this begs the question: What happens when normally reliable processes for forming beliefs (like seeing) fail to produce knowledge? Here's a classic example: let's say I know, just by looking at it, that a particular stick looks straight in the air, but appears bent in water. I know the stick can't be both straight and bent. (Maybe I run my fingers along the length of the stick.) Or my wife picks out a rose-colored tie. I think it's too drab and gray, but she says it's actually quite colorful. Visual experiences are generally reliable, but not perfect. What do we do?

When mix-ups occur, we resort to belief-testing procedures to help us sort out problematic beliefs we've formed. When two perceptions lead to opposite conclusions (Is the stick straight or bent?) or two different perceivers see different things (Is the tie rose or gray?), we evaluate each of the beliefs. The conflicts lead to testing. So I might recall learning in high school physics about light refracting when it passes through water. Or I might remember (or my wife will remind me) that I'm colorblind in reds and greens; rose is tough for me to see. So in facing conflicting claims to knowledge, we're not stuck. We have recourse to testing procedures.

This helps us see where skepticism goes wrong. The problem with skepticism is its tendency to focus dominantly on these testing procedures. It overlooks the normally reliable processes of *belief-formation* and obsesses on *belief-critique.* Epistemology needs to balance finding truth and avoiding error. Skepticism forgets the former, even when it focuses on the latter. In fact, both are important.

So how do we test? First, our beliefs should be rational. At a minimum, this means that our beliefs shouldn't contradict one another. This is *coherence*, a negative test. If two beliefs

contradict, the principle of coherence requires that we discard at least one of the two.

Second, our beliefs should fit with evidence. If a belief doesn't fit with a whole host of data we have reason to accept as true, we reject that belief as false. Take the belief, "I'm the sixteenth president of the United States." This belief conflicts with a couple of other well-established facts: "The sixteenth president was Abe Lincoln"; "My name isn't Abe"; "Lincoln is dead"; and "I'm alive." Generally, when we discover beliefs that are out of step with other things we know, we reject them. In sum, the most important tests we use to evaluate a particular belief include consistency with other solidly-grounded beliefs and connection to authentic experience of the world.

Now so far, I've been talking about *individual beliefs*. But we also seek knowledge about large *networks of truth claims*. A large-scale scientific theory, for example, is a complex set of interlocking claims, all connected in a large web of belief. Examples are the geocentric solar system, the germ theory of disease, or the theory of evolution. Large-scale models include many different kinds of claims, including scientific, historical, and even religious convictions, and these individual beliefs fit together like a web. How do we evaluate these?

Large-scale models compete with each other to see which one does the best job of explaining all the facts. So, the heliocentric (sun-centered) model of our solar system competed with the geocentric (earth-centered) model. For centuries, scientists debated about which system best explained all the facts. Today, there's no doubt.

Or consider this example. When National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigators probe a plane crash, they look for evidence. By experience, they know what to look for. They find telltale clues that unlock patterns of interpretation and eventually lead to a strongly supported explanation of the accident's cause. If they decide a turbine fin in one of the engines cracked, they will show how this explanation incorporates all the relevant data—like the loud explosion and the sudden loss of airspeed. A large-scale theory is a properly-supported, interlocking web of true beliefs supported by the individual facts that connect to the real world.

Testing large-scale constellations of belief isn't simple. Sometimes it's just impossible to figure out things like, say, why the Edmund Fitzgerald sank on Lake Superior on November 10, 1975. If certain key pieces of evidence lie at the bottom of the lake, investigators may never learn why a particular ship went down. Theories about complex processes are sometimes hidden from us.

But not always. Testing models makes judgments by answering questions of several different kinds. What are the facts to be explained? (Sometimes the two models will disagree on this.) What are the criteria by which we decide which explanation is best? (Sometimes the two explanations will excel at different criteria.) Testing isn't straightforward and linear. But reasonable judgments are still possible. When the NTSB investigators find a cracked turbine fin, they know to blame the maintenance department, not the pilots.

When testing large-scale models by pitting them against each other, we use

explanatory values. In the NTSB example, we contrast the "Maintenance Error Model" against the "Pilot Error Model." Or, we might pit the geocentric solar system model against the heliocentric solar system model, or the Ancient Earth Creation model against the Young Earth Creation model. In making these contrasts, we're asking this question: Which model, taken as a whole, does the best job of meeting the widest range of explanatory values. These values include explanatory power: Which model explains the most facts? They include simplicity: Which model avoids unnecessary mental gymnastics? And they include coherence: Which model is most logical internally? A model that provides high levels of explanatory power, simplicity, coherence, and even clarity, cleverness, and beauty, would be called elegant. We judge an elegant model to be more likely true than its alternative. Gathering knowledge isn't always easy, and sometimes the score in the contest between two models remains tied for a while. Yet it's amazing how much we can learn through carefully using all the strategies we have available: the NTSB often does arrive at a very well-grounded explanation for why a particular plane crashed.

Testing large-scale models is important, for worldviews (e.g., the Christian worldview) are large-scale models. Showing that it's true is more like proving the germ theory of disease (large-scale model) than verifying the score of last night's Timberwolves game (fact). Large-scale testing is increasingly important because many people today buy into what might be called ideologies. Ideologies are large-scale models. Typically, they're simple but broad interpretations of the world, and they carry a lot of influence, especially in politics and religion. Unlike the Christian worldview, ideologies have a flaw: they're "fact-resistant narratives." When we don't have genuine knowledge, for whatever reason, people are loath to say, "I just don't know." The human tendency is to create a narrative. In the absence of good explanations, we even make things up. And today, social influencers of various kinds take advantage of this and build "narratives." These narratives become very powerful.

The fact-resistant nature of ideologies is a particular problem. Ideologies resist falsification through a built-in immunity to counter-evidence. For example, I once encountered two religious missionaries who told me a story about their faith. When I pointed out that this supposedly historical tale actually has zero evidence to commend it, they asked me, "Where did you get that argument?" I pointed to a book. They said, "Oh, that book was written by an infidel. We don't accept that." These missionaries protected their fact-resistant viewpoint (which doesn't fit the facts of history) through a built-in mechanism that protected them from contrary evidence. So no matter what the facts, these handsome young men were going to stick with their narrative. Their religion functioned like a conspiracy theory which has a built-in sewer pipe to flush away any hint of contrary evidence.

In an age when postmodern sensibilities abound, especially in religion, ideologies are especially dangerous. Truth is important because truth enables us to live lives that are congruent with reality. At a simple level, I don't jump off tall buildings because *it's true* that I'm heavier than air and I can't fly. More fundamentally, I trust in Christ who reconciles me to God because *it's true* that God exists, that I have sinned, and that reconciliation

with God leads to abundant life. The goal of gaining genuine knowledge is not to collect data points like baseball cards. The goal is to live in congruence with reality. But too many people overlook the value of genuine knowledge. The turn to ideologies in our politics and to conspiracies in our social lives both threatens human well-being and undermines Christian witness.

We must say that postmodernity has done the world a favor by highlighting the interplay of power and knowledge. This insight equips us to be wary of fallacious claims that benefit the con man. But it also matters greatly that we find a path through power politics all the way to truth. Without truth, persuasion devolves into power. For many reasons, therefore, we need an approach to truth that will help us acquire legitimate knowledge, separate truth from error, and ground a life in wisdom.

Grounding the Knowledge We Need in Intellectual Virtues

Knowledge-building includes a "something else" that legitimates true belief. Unfortunately, there are few things about which philosophers disagree more than this! That said, what is the most helpful way to think about the "legitimizing facts" that turn true belief into knowledge? The general account I find most persuasive focuses on *intellectual virtues.* Intellectual virtues are like moral virtues—things like love of truth, intellectual honesty, and epistemic courage. Love of truth places value on knowledge and dedicates effort to finding truth. Intellectual honesty involves appraising evidence fairly and admitting and reducing personal biases. Epistemic courage includes willingness to take minority positions or to challenge one's own beliefs when these are warranted.

A person who acts in a praiseworthy manner when forming and testing beliefs exhibits intellectual virtues. These virtues are learned; they arise as habits. Like good habits of all kinds, intellectual virtues are the sorts of things that become part of our character the more we practice them. Unfortunately, bad habits also grow strong the more we do them. A conspiracy theorist continues to seek self-reinforcing opinions and to resist contrary evidence. (Imagine how dangerous that is in choosing a religion!) A dictator's intellectual dishonesty grows as he listens only to good news and punishes those who bring bad news. So good habits lead to well-supported knowledge. They lead one to seek evidence fairly and evaluate beliefs for consistency. In this view, we can define *knowledge* as true belief which is reached or acquired through acts of virtue.[3]

Does this help us respond to the two Skeptical Questions? Recall that modern skepticism is fixated on very high standards for the adequacy of a person's evidence. The key insight of this emphasis on virtue is that knowledge doesn't depend only on the evidence

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3 There is an important, if technical, difference between true belief that is formed by a person who *generally* exhibits virtue and true belief that is formed through *an act* of virtue. The former is less successful at ruling out cases—called "Gettier counter-examples"—where true beliefs are formed by luck. The latter is much more successful in doing so.

(though evidence is important), but also on how a person goes about gathering evidence. So whether or not a particular belief truly counts as knowledge for me has to do with whether I test the belief in intellectual virtuous ways. The existence of evidence in the abstract is important: explanatory virtues (e.g. coherence, explanatory power) help us discern truth, but equally important is whether I rightly handle the evidence, and that's about intellectual virtue.

An emphasis on the intellectual virtues also helps us answer the postmodern skeptical challenge. Remember the valid insights behind Will's objections, insights that point us to the abuse of knowledge claims. By emphasizing virtue, we practice the habits of treating evidence honestly, working to overcome our biases, and refusing to misuse evidence to gain advantage. Of course, history is full of people who didn't act virtuously and who run roughshod over evidence in their attempt to gain political advantage. This shows that some people aren't virtuous, but not that knowledge is impossible for those who love the truth.

Religious Knowledge

Many people view religious knowledge with suspicion. Religion is about subjective feelings, not objective facts, it is said. Can a virtue epistemology help us here? Obviously, the truth of God's existence may be more difficult to discern than the truth that touching a hot stove causes burns. And some will say that if God is real, he should have made his existence more obvious. Now this is the so-called *hiddenness of God problem*, and it will take us into deep waters. But here a few initial insights.

First, some kinds of knowledge are just more obvious than others. If Jill learns about hot stoves by acquaintance, genuine knowledge is (quite regrettably) hard to miss. But many kinds of knowledge—not just knowledge of God—are easy to miss. In dealing with more difficult kinds of knowledge, skills and virtues may need to be learned. One must *learn how to learn*. Reading X-rays is challenging. Radiologists must gain virtues and master skills. Similarly, the church's saints suggest that coming to know God requires some training.

Second, the Bible teaches that God isn't particularly interested in having people merely believe *that* he exists. Intellectual knowledge of the statement "God exists" won't cut it. In fact, James 2:19 says (in a sarcastic tone worthy of a late-night talk show host), "So you believe that God exists? So what! Even the demons believe that." God doesn't want people to learn about him in a ho hum, "Sure, God exists, so what?" sort of way. Instead, the Christian God, wanting what is morally best for us, wants us to depend on him, to trust him, and commit ourselves to him. So maybe, given God's purposes, making his existence too obvious would be counter-productive.

Third, we often miss or ignore the evidence we do have. According to the Bible, God

did make his presence quite obvious at particular times in history. But people still refused or failed to see him. For example, in the person of Jesus, God literally walked among the people of Palestine. But many people didn't follow him. Jesus once fed 5000 people by multiplying a small lunch. Everyone was duly impressed. But instead of recognizing this miracle as a sign of God's presence, the vast majority took it as a shortcut to a literally free lunch.

Why do people miss evidence? Some failures to see the evidence for God may be due to lack of ability or lack of interest. For instance, distinguishing a Stradivarius from an ordinary violin requires a practiced ear. Similarly, learning to know God intimately requires qualities that must be developed. The Bible says that "the pure in heart will see God" (Matthew 5:8).

But often, it's a lack of intellectual virtue. For those who develop the intellectual virtues, indications of God's existence are quite surprising. As just one example, scientists have learned that the universe is fine-tuned for life. The design parameters for life are very specific. This means that if the forces that hold the universe together varied just slightly—differed by just a couple percentage points or less—then life as we know it would be impossible. Our universe may seem inhospitable to life. But in fact, those who open their minds to the details of the universe's structure will find that only a universe very specifically like this one can produce life. And this speaks powerfully to an intelligent designer behind the universe. To one who knows God, this evidence for God seems quite clear and compelling. The more we explore, the greater the reasons to conclude that genuine knowledge of God is possible.

CONCLUSION

The Skeptical Question arose in Western thought due to a long, meandering series of sometimes well-intentioned, but often ill-conceived intellectual moves. One thing is clearer today than it has been for centuries: it's reasonable and well-justified to pursue genuine knowledge of the infinite God and the eternal joy God promises. We must acknowledge that one of the core goals of epistemology is to avoid error. We certainly don't want to follow a false god. Seeking to evade error by disbelieving everything, strong skeptics obviously succeed in believing nothing *false*. In so doing, however, they overshoot their mark. Theirs is a Pyrrhic victory. In exchange for minimal protection from the stray erroneous belief, strong skeptics pay a maximal price. If God is who the Bible says he is, they miss out on the joy of knowing their Creator. They become like the man who never marries for fear of divorce, and for that very reason fails to taste the joys of married life.

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