Below is a reflection written around 2019 for a friend questioning his faith.

There are many different reasons to believe in God, and I wanted to illustrate the strongest reasons that I believe in God. Some of these arguments are purely intellectual while others are personal and based on my own experience. I am not giving them to you in chronological order. Clearly, the first chronological reason that I believe in God is because my parents taught me that God existed and taught me about God. It was only later that I questioned and wrestled with these things. I have thought a lot about them and read a great deal. It was also only later that I had some of the experiences that I will share. But rather than present them in chronological order of how I came to understand them, I think I will start with the intellectual arguments first because these are the easiest to think about objectively before sharing the more subjective experiences.

I. The Necessary Being

I think the strongest argument for God's existence is the idea of a necessary being which is one of St. Thomas Aquinas five arguments, and was also the argument of other great philosophers like Maimonides (a Jew) and Avicenna (a Muslim). The idea is that we see many things in the world that are *contingent*: they could be or not be, or they could happen or they couldn't. Indeed, it seems that this is the case for almost anything, if we think about it hard enough. What determines why one thing exists and another doesn't? Why one thing happens and another doesn't? Why the world is one way and not another way? Why does something exist at one point but not at a later time? or an earlier time?

One answer might be that something caused it to be so. Why am I short, while my younger brother Tom is so tall? Well, his genes are different than mine, and maybe some of it is nutrition. Why was I born healthy in a happy family, while a little Korean girl that we hoped to adopt named Yeonhee was born unhealthy to a prostitute mother? Well, my parents were married and loving and didn't do drugs, while Yeonhee's mother was a prostitute who did drugs while she was pregnant. Why is Donald Trump president? Well, the voters in the U.S. decided things based on the campaigns and the social, economic situations, etc. We had lower voter turnout (and Russia was perhaps somehow involved ☺). Why does earth support life? Well, it has water and the sun is the right size and distance away to keep the temperature right, and the gravity is enough to sustain an atmosphere with oxygen and carbon dioxide. Why does the sun need to be the right size and distance for a planet's life? Well, if it is too hot the carbon molecules will gasify or burn up, and if things are too cold, things will freeze and either way, the right chemical reactions won't be able to take place for life.

But these aren't *really* answers since they just lead to other contingencies. That is, none of these explanations need to be the case either. They just lead to longer chains of "why?" that need some explaining. But how does anything exist, if it is all contingent? There must be something (or someone) that *necessarily* exists, i.e., whose existence isn't contingent. You might think that this necessary being could be the laws of the universe, or the universe itself, but again it's clear that these are contingent (at least logically, in the case of the laws of the universe). There must be something (or someone) whose existence is necessary, who precedes the existence of other things (not chronologically but logically).

I think we see this when we think about chance. Many times we think of randomness as something we simply don't understand. Why did one lottery number get drawn and not another? Well, it isn't truly *random,* but we say it is random because we don't understand how it happened, and we certainly couldn't predict it with any accuracy. It is a shortcut to think of it as "random". But whether random or not, we can't really conceive of something without any cause. In economics, we often write models with random events in which these random shocks occur. To convey the message, we talk about "nature" drawing a realization from a probabilistic distribution because we need some sense of how this comes about, and our minds apparently find it impossible to even conceive of something occurring without a cause. How can something come from nothing? (Interestingly, we *can* think about personal agency, i.e., someone making a decision that determines something, and that decision being a pure act of free will. This is why "nature" draws the realization.)

Logically it is impossible for something to come of nothing. Contingency therefore requires something to come of something, which leads to an endless chain of contingencies unless grounded by something that is not contingent, the necessary being. (An infinite chain of contingencies could well exist, but the chain itself would be contingent: i.e., why this chain, and not another chain?) A necessary being is a being that necessarily exists without contingency. We call this necessary being, "God", and so the first and foremost characteristic of God is that he exists, and it is part of God's very nature to exist.

This philosophical idea of God is in no way at odds with the biblical God. In the first chapter of the Bible, we read that God exists before and outside of the creation of the world itself. In Exodus, when Moses asks God's name, He replies, "Yahweh" which means "I am". Existence is the first fundamental characteristic of God. It is not only that God exists, but that God *necessarily* exists, and his existence is prior (not in the sense of time, but in the sense of logic) to any other existence.

Personally, although I have gone through times of doubt, and I have intellectually thought about the idea of there being no God, I have never really *felt* that there was no God. Instead, I have felt a presence. I don't mean feel by way of the five senses, but I have always been comforted by an unknown presence. Even when I am completely by myself, or hiking far from society, and even at times when I am lonely, I have never felt completely alone in this world. I think this has allowed to me to have a persistent faith in God but also a general lack of worry in life. (My wife, Juhi, tells me that this was not her experience, and that she felt even more alone if someone shared this, but I share it out of an honesty.)

Most recently, when I thought I was having a heart attack, which was later interpreted as perhaps a grand mal seizure but at this point is simply an unexplained physical episode, I started blacking out walking down the stairs. My last normal thoughts were of my friend, Tim Fuerst, who was only worried for his family as he struggled with cancer. I realized I was blacking out, and this might be serious, and, like Tim, I too was worried about my wife and kids. I eventually went black, and my thoughts and consciousness shut down. In the depths of unconsciousness, I was somehow able to pray, "Please God. I need to live for my kids." At that moment, I felt a presence and a reassurance that all would be okay. A profound peace

came over me, and I gradually regained consciousness. Juhi was in panic, and the paramedics were taking care of me, but I knew that all would be okay, and I tried to reassure Juhi and everyone else. One can write this off as a purely psychological or physical phenomenon, but it was all something completely outside of my control and really the control of anyone else like Juhi, paramedics, doctors, etc.

I heard a priest once say (I believe Fr. David Tracy, who is a professor at the University of Chicago) that people experience God's presence at moments of their lives, but they also experience God's absence. It is not surprising that people who deny His existence, ignore Him, or treat Him as a side consideration don't seem to recognize God's presence at key moments in their lives. It is much more surprising that very holy people feel that God is absent to them at times. But great saints like Mother Teresa have gone through long periods of this absence, and the Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross described it as the "dark night of the soul". Even Jesus on the Cross said, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me." These times can be quite painful and troubling. Mary, even though raising Jesus, had strong moments of clarity and faith, but must have also had moments of absence. Ultimately, there are times when we can't sense people, and yet we know they exist. While an absence is not positive evidence of someone's nonexistence, a presence or encounter *is* positive evidence of God's existence. This is something to remember. That is why Mary, "Treasured up all these things, and pondered them in her heart." (Luke 2:19, 51)

II. Basis of Truth

Let's start by defining truth as the conformity of an idea or word to the actual reality. The idea that truth exists presupposes that an "actual reality" exists. That is, there is an objective reality outside of our own existence. We might say that this actual reality is the physical universe itself, and surely this understanding is enough for many aspects of truth. But there are other truths that transcend the physical universe itself. At this point, I am not talking about spiritual realities, but other, more commonplace realities. So, for example, the existence of the constant pi is true. But pi is something that transcends the physical universe. Yes, it equals the ratio of the circumference of a perfect circle to its radius, but no such ideal or perfect circle actually exists in the physical universe. Moreover, it pops up in all sorts of other truths from the area of a circle, surface area of a sphere, to the definitions of sin and cosine functions. Human beings did not "invent" pi, but they "discovered" it because it already existed on its own. On what basis does pi have an objective existence?

It is human nature to seek truth. We delight in knowing the truth, and although we sometimes deceive others from knowing the truth (i.e., lie), we ourselves want to know the truth. One might come up with an evolutionary explanation for this -- knowing the truth is useful and helps perpetuate the species – but that doesn't seem to fully capture our thirst for truth. There are plenty of aspects of truth that aren't at all useful to perpetuate life, and yet we still seek the truth. For example, we delight in the knowledge of history or of faraway galaxies, music lyrics, sports trivia.

In fact, we even seek the truth when it makes us sad. There are people who truly believe the world to be hopeless, and so commit suicide. This doesn't perpetuate the species, but,

ironically, still this natural inclination to truth impels them. Ironically (and also erroneously) many people who stop believing in God feel sad and a sense of loss, but nevertheless they stop believing because, even if it were to make them happy, they feel that it is untrue, and they naturally seek the truth.

But what is the basis of truth? It must be existence itself to which an idea can conform. If only the physical universe exists, how can there be truth about the past? Things in the future do not yet exist. Things that are in the past no longer exist. In what sense can something conform to the actual reality of the past, which no longer exists? And yet we believe that there is an objective truth that, for example, George Washington lived. Are the only things of the past for which there is a basis of truth, those things for which people have current memories? If so, did things that no one observed ever really exist? How can we be sure that something happened in the past rather than being an erroneous memory in people's minds – like the movie, *Total Recall* – or some initial condition. Similarly, are the only things that exist, things that people know about? But how then can people discover things? Again, things like far off galaxies or truths like pi exist whether we know of them or not. Moreover, if things depended on human knowledge, how can we be sure of what is recorded in any other person's mind? Would it then be only our own minds that are the judge of truth? But truth by its nature is objective. Any attempt to make it subjective seems like a circle of folly and nonsense.

The fact is that all of these things – past, future, faraway places, Schrödinger's cat, etc. – all have an objective reality. The theist understands that they have an existence in the mind of God who exists in all conditions, in all times and space, and indeed outside of time and space. In that sense, God *is* the basis of truth. In that sense, the existence of truth is intimately connected with the fact that God exists and is the necessary being.

Again, all of this lines up with the biblical understanding of God. John's Gospel starts out "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word as God." The Greek word for "word" is "logos", which also means "reason" and "rational", as in the word "logic". In Christian theology, the Word is second person of the Trinity, the eternal reflection of the Father's being. In John's Gospel, the Word is a reference to Jesus, who also says "I am the truth".

I think the Scripture itself is great evidence of this objective Truth that exists outside time and space. Yes, there are very confusing and confounding passages of Scripture, but there are also obviously prophetic passages as well, especially those about Jesus, e.g., suffering servant passages of Isaiah (Isaiah 42:1–9; Isaiah 49:1–13; Isaiah 50:4–11; and Isaiah 52:13—53:12), the Psalms (e.g., Psalms 22 and 118), or, probably the strongest in my opinion, Wisdom 2. All of these were written hundreds of years before Jesus, and they are hard to ignore. Jesus himself was quite prophetic of the future. Some of it is within the Gospels, but others were far past his death (e.g., the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 AD, as predicted by Jesus, which put an end to Jewish animal sacrifice, given that Christ's own sacrifice was its completion.) Another is the prediction of suffering and triumph for his followers: The Church was founded on (1) the criminal execution of its leader, who himself was a person of no title from a backwater town, and (2) a claim of the absurd that this man rose from the dead and was witnessed by others. It was built by this group of close-friend witnesses nearly all of whom were eventually

executed, and afterward it continued to be persecuted for hundreds of years by both its own religious authorities (the Jewish leaders) and the pagan civil authorities (the Romans). Yet – without violence, military power, or political machinations – to somehow to emerge as the official religion of this empire is quite hard to even imagine. This is not "Donald Trump is elected president"-level surprising but something far beyond. Again, if you make enough predictions, you occasionally get lucky and we may only remember the correct ones. But these predictions are so transparent and clear, and off the wall, that it is hard (or, I would say, impossible) to explain otherwise. These prophecies are positive reasons to believe in God.

III. Basis of Morality

Another way to know that God exists is through the channel of morality. This is tricky because it is clear that there is a lot of disagreement about the specifics of what is right and wrong. I am not sure why this fact brings so many doubts to people's minds, because it is obviously the case. I don't discuss it more here because it is somewhat irrelevant to whether God exists. The main point is that despite huge disagreement (across cultures, individuals, times, etc.) on *what* is right and wrong, there is very strong agreement *that* some things are right and other things are wrong, i.e, that right and wrong exist.

No life can be lived without a sense of right and wrong. We have something innate built into us about many aspects of morality, for example. Even children have a sense of fairness and injustice. It may not be appropriately or equally applied to themselves and others, but this sense it exists. Anger and gratitude are natural sentiments that reinforce these ideas of justice. Most people also feel empathy for others, and as I mentioned above, etc. (In fact, Adam Smith based his views on morality on this, which he called "moral sentiments".) Other arguments may be less ingrained, e.g., racism may actually have some innate origins – people predisposed to be more positive toward people that look like them – but it is *reason* rather than feeling tells us this is wrong. Moreover, in many cases feeling may tell us that *someone else*'s actions are unjust, but it is some exercise of reason (e.g., putting ourselves in the other person's shoes) that tells us *our own* actions are unjust.

The mind naturally works with a regard toward morality. Indeed, even those who espouse moral relativism have strong thoughts about what is right and wrong. They tend to use moral relativist arguments to undermine support of morals they disagree with. The moral relativist argument also leads to people thinking, "This may be wrong for me, but not for someone else." What does that even mean? Reason tells you that to say something "is wrong" is to make an objective statement. It is clear that there is a difference between saying "Pizza is delicious" and "Murder is wrong". The one is a subjective statement, and the other is an objective statement. To say "Murder is wrong" is to say something distinct from "I don't like murder". Indeed, it is more akin to saying, "I don't like murder, and neither should you." Even to argue for moral relativism in our modern world is to say "I don't think someone should impose their moral beliefs on someone else," but note that this itself is a normative value judgement (with the word "should" right there in the sentence). The natural, but circular, follow up argument is "neither should you think someone should impose their moral beliefs on someone else." The mind naturally works toward a sense of morality.

But if some things are right and some things are wrong, what can be the basis of right and wrong?

- Evolutionary principles that have endowed us with a moral sense that enhances our chances of survival as a group? Is this an argument for people who don't have a moral sense, like psychotics? Is this an argument where clearly people have strong differences of opinion about whether something is right or wrong, like politics? This might come up with a positive explanation for morality as a human concept (although I think an inadequate one), but it is certainly no argument for why morality ought to be one way and not another.
- Is morality based on majority rule? Like truth, I think reason tells us this is not the case. If the majority, or even the totality of humanity decided it was okay to kill innocent human life, reason would tell us it was still wrong. This is why we have things like a bill of *rights*. There is something that is *right*, no matter what the majority says.
- Is it simply a question of what will make us happy as a society, i.e., a conditional imperative, "If you want everyone to be happy, you should…"? How does any conditional imperative hold any sway over the person who doesn't care about the condition, e.g., in this case, everyone being happy?

So we are back to the question, what tells us what is *right?* Reason dictates that it is something outside of ourselves. We try very hard to rationalize things in our favor where we are the arbiter of what is right, but we know this is not the case. One reason that moral arguments can be debated is because they have the ability to hold sway not only on others but also on ourselves. We feel guilty for things we have done, for example, and others can have a role in making us feel guilty.

Like truth, right and wrong are, by their very nature, objective rather than subjective. Just as God's existence is the only objective basis for truth, God's existence is the only objective basis for right or wrong. God's will and reason/truth are the objective basis of right and wrong.

I think the atheist has no objective basis for right and wrong. He or she believes that the theist is under a delusion that God exists, but the atheist also has strong feelings of right and wrong and must therefore believe that he himself or she herself is under the delusion that right and wrong objectively exist. I suggest that one can live coherently under (i.e., in a fashion consistent with) belief in God. I suggest it is impossible to live coherently under the belief that nothing is really right or wrong.

I have attached [at the end of this essay] a document I wrote for my son, who is very intelligent but at the time, he didn't quite understand the idea of right and wrong. (Being on the autism spectrum, doesn't experience empathy or an ability or desire to put himself into another person's shoes in quite the same way that other people might.) In that document, I emphasize the ways that reason can lead to moral truths, and how reason, making sense of moral truths can lead to knowledge of God. You might find it interesting, so I'll attach it.

In any case, the basis of morals argument for God is again consistent with the Christian concept of God. It is now that God is more than just some*thing* that exists, or some basis of truths and

laws, but God is some*one*, a being with a perfect will and with perfect reason that guides that will. Our knowledge of morality – however guided or misguided we are in our understanding – is based on how it lines up with this perfect will. In this way, God is the origin and objective standard for Goodness.

In my own life, my own beliefs on right and wrong are strong and yet they have changed tremendously over time. Some of my beliefs are guided by sentiments, some by reason, some by experience, but much of it is simply what my parents taught me. My parents were not overbearing moralists, and in many ways, although they are quite moral, they are much more lax about morals, forgiving of others, etc., than I am. I emphasize this because although I was raised with a great deal of Catholic morality, I didn't have "Catholic guilt" ingrained in me. Guilt is not the driving force behind my sense of morality. Yet, it is not that I always follow my moral sense. I have ways in which I am faithful and ways in which I fail. Moreover, I have *times* when I am strongly faithful, and times when I am not. What is striking to me is that I myself have almost always, without fail, been happiest when I am being the best person I can be. (Of course, you might argue there is an endogeneity problem, but I think that, in our own interior lives and self-examination, causation is a much easier to self-discern.) Morality helps make us happy.

You might also argue that this is simply human wisdom, but it is a very unusual human wisdom. Catholic theology is quite peculiar, and, to the outsider, Catholic morality is quite peculiar. G.K. Chesterton has a metaphor of the Catholic faith as a key. A key is a very unusually shaped object. If you came from a different planet or time without keys, you would really have no idea what it was for or how it might work. You would have no idea why the shape is exactly what it is, but what you would appreciate easily is that the key worked. I have found this to be the case in my life. Moreover, I have found this to be the case even with morality that I originally rejected out of sentiment or (faulty) reason. For this reason, I have a great deal of faith in revealed moral truths that the Church teaches, even when I don't especially understand it. Indeed, it is even more striking that the teaching seems sound, given the fact that so many members and even leaders of the Catholic Church clearly don't follow or believe in the truths themselves. That gives me confidence that it is truly Revelation, coming from God rather than men.

IV. Source of Beauty

I will go over this idea quickly. I remember in high school we learned of the philosophical conundrum of why evil exists. "If there is a perfect, all-knowing, omniscient God, why does He let evil exist?" There are lots of different answers to this question, and I won't bore you. You can read the book of Job.

The question that strikes me is not why bad things exist, but why do good things exist? Why, for example, does beauty exist? Or joy? Or awe? Certain types of beauty, e.g., physical beauty in the opposite sex, might have evolutionary advantages. Other aspects of beauty like symmetry or order are really aesthetically appealing to our intellect. Why does a view of a sunset or a view from a mountain top move us? What could possibly explain this? What about the "I am so small" feeling we get when we gaze at the night sky, or the ocean? Perhaps even

more relevant, what about the experience of joy? I am not talking about enjoying food, where pleasure might be a driver for survival, or even the enjoyment of friends which might reinforce social bonds that help for survival. What about pure joy for joy's sake, which you might feel when you're alone for no reason. Finally, I can think about beauty in people. I think I've told you about my friend and colleague, Tim Fuerst, who passed away from cancer two years ago. He was a living saint, and I said this well before he ever got sick. It is quite sad that he suffered, died, and left his wife and children to suffer. Suffering and sorrow are real, and probably almost overwhelming for them. To me the suffering and sorrow are there, but what is more stunning is that a person whose soul was so beautiful and joy-giving ever existed in the first place. Amazing, and why did he exist, but also why did I feel and appreciate the beauty and joy? Beauty and joy are not simply part of the world we live in, but something that is *experienced* by people. So is a sense of awe.

I will only say that one could certainly imagine a functional world where such things didn't exist. They seem to play no function in the *survival* of the human species. One could get there purely through pain avoidance, I believe, and certainly if this were balanced by simple pleasures. If such things and experiences are not necessary, then they require some explanation. Why do they exist? Who or what has determined that they exist, and why?

I think that joy and beauty play a much deeper functional role than mere survival. This role is to take us out of the material world and have us seek something deeper. Indeed, they open our hearts and minds to *someone* who is the source of joy and beauty. This is true with our natural loves. For example, our spouses are sources of both joy and beauty in our lives, and these open us up to love our spouses. But this deeper existential joy and transcendent beauty open us up to love God Himself. I don't love the sunset itself or the night sky, but the joy that comes from knowing there is someone deeper behind such beauty. Moreover, that someone seems to want to use beauty to speak to us. Yes, this is a theory, but it is a reasonable theory that explains the facts.

V. The Human Experience and Love

I have just touched on love, and I think everything about our experience us there is something about love that is central to human life. We find mentions of love everywhere from love of God and neighbor in the Bible to romance movies, novels, and music in secular art. Everyone from philosophers to poets values it. What does love mean? St. Thomas Aquinas defined love as the virtue of willing or desiring the good of another.

To understand that better, let's start with the will and with basic human experience. One of the most universal and earliest human experiences is that there is a world that exists outside of us that we can't fully control. Babies get too warm or too cold, they feel pain, none of which is under their control, and we all experienced this before we even had a sense of ourselves. They cry and usually (hopefully) Mom or Dad comes to help the situation, but that's not something they fully control. All of this connects with the earlier discussion of an objective reality that exists outside of us. But then a second basic experience is that we realize there are things that we *can* control. We can choose when to cry, we can move our hands and feet. As we grow, we realize this even more. We have autonomous processes even within our bodies (like our

heartbeat) but other things we control (like our hands), and other things (breathing, vision) that can be autonomous but we can control them if we are conscious of it and do so intentionally. There is a realization that that we ourselves exist as real persons, that we can choose, and that we want a variety of things and actively seek them.

But what is it that every person seeks? Everyone makes different decisions, and so one could argue that there is nothing that we all seek. In economics, we simply assert that people have preferences and acknowledge that preferences differ. And yet, there are commonalities in what human beings seek. People like different foods, but everyone seeks sustenance and enjoyment in their foods. An economist might say that what we all seek is to maximize utility, and yet the even word utility, which means "usefulness," implies something beyond the decisions we make about what to consume. We realize that what we consume is a *means* to end, but what is the end itself?

The universal thing that all people seek is happiness. This is the end that we pursue, and yet it is (for me and everyone I know) a sometimes-frustrating pursuit. We know that it is possible, as we experience being happy at times, and yet we also know that it can be fleeting. A fun evening or a good meal can make us happy, but the evening can't go on forever, and a second good meal would only leave us bloated. Two of the most basic practical questions to any human being are therefore: 1) what is it that brings us happiness? and, 2) how can we make it last? I would posit that most of human experience teaches us that love, in a very practical way, is at least a very important part of the answers to both of these questions.

Love is an absolute necessity for human beings. Simple observation can show us that we are different from most animals, and not only because of our intellects. We are frail relative to many species. We have a long period of time when we are completely dependent upon others, and still longer before we are able to care for ourselves. We need loving parents or caregivers to bring us to maturity. Even as adults, we are not particularly strong, fast, or agile, nor do we reproduce at rates that allow most offspring to die before reproducing. We need to work together as a community to survive and flourish. Thus, we need love of our family members and even neighbors. With only purely selfish motives, human life would cease to exist.

There is certainly something to this view of love, but I don't think it captures the full importance or centrality of love to human life. In the above view, love is really an instrument, a means to an end. But I think experience tells us that love is much more of an end in itself. Every culture places love at high value, in a way that other means-to-an-end are not. This is not just Catholic theology. A good share of all human artistic efforts across all cultures are angled toward the portrayal, reflection on, and glorification of love. The Beatles argue that "Love is all we need". People do not write poems to food, "Food is all we need." In another famous song and expression, "Love makes the world go round," but, as important as oxygen is for human life, it would be absurd to say that "Oxygen makes the world go round." Love holds a primacy among human emotions too. Our focus on love is so much greater than our focus on universal aspects of human emotions that are negative like fear, anger, disgust, hate, or even pleasure.

Moreover, love is much stronger than needed for mere survival and not something that can be anticipated before it is experienced. No matter how many movies I'd seen or songs I heard, romantic love came as a quite a surprise to me the first time I experienced it. The head over heels aspect, the way it made all of life seem sunnier, etc. Similarly, love for my own children was quite a surprise the first time I experienced it. I was surprised how much sacrifice it could draw out of me. It was something so powerful that I reflected a lot on it, and I even rejoiced in reflecting on it, which is part of the reason I reflected on it. I think the attention paid to love in culture shows that my experience is not unique. We see that love opens up new dimensions of life in ways previously unknown. We experience it more than a simple emotional experience that might be explained by neurological discharges in the mind or chemical hormones in the blood stream. Such an explanation simply does not capture love. Instead, we feel that love is something that existed before our experience of it, and is somehow both something we experience and something outside of us and bigger than ourselves. Love feels so important that it is somehow intimately related with the purpose of life, and our instincts draw us toward it.

Another piece of evidence that love is so central is how devastating it is when love is lost, or when love turns out to be not what we'd hoped, or what it seemed. It can be devastating. What purpose could such suffering play, if love were only meant for survival? Even lost love is a far greater focus than other negatives like fear, anger, hatred or disgust. What about the inevitable suffering that love entails, when loved ones suffer and die?

I mentioned that having a child is such an eye-opening experience, but the process itself is also eye opening. Why is human child bearing so painful for the mother? Again, what role could that play? It is clearly something that needs some explaining. As the Bible describes it as a consequence of sin, I believe it holds a lesson. It tells us an undeniable truth: that true love, in a world with sin, involves a great deal of suffering and requires a willingness to suffer.

There is also something paradoxical about love. I don't think one has to be a Christian to realize that love has a mysterious property of calling us out of ourselves. Self-love *seems* as if it is the way to make us happy, but giving of ourselves and loving others is what truly brings happiness. It is paradoxical because it is when we forget about ourselves that we find happiness. This is all the more so true with sacrifice. We have a strong inclination toward self-serving behavior and a disinclination to sacrifice for others, and yet we find that when we give to others or sacrifice for others, we receive more in return. Indeed, the happiest people are those who most give of themselves, those who are the most loving. And people who are the most selfish are often the least happy. Love seems to be part of the key to happiness.

To summarize, our instincts and all of human experience tell us that we seek happiness, that love is somehow central to this happiness, and it is much more than instrumental to survival. It seems intimately linked to the purpose in life or the goal in life. It feels like the key to happiness or perhaps happiness itself. And yet love also feels in some way separate from purely an interior experience, and it involves both joy and suffering. All of this is hard to explain given a naturalistic approach. We have a constant yearning for love, the same way we have a constant yearning for happiness. It is not satiated in the same way are yearning for life or survival instincts are.

What purpose could this yearning play, and what could be the source? St. Augustine describes this constant yearning poetically, "You have made us for Yourself. Our hearts are restless, and they not rest until they rest in You." God Himself is the source of not only ourselves but our yearning and our intuition that love is central to who we are.

Indeed, in the Bible, Jesus calls love our guiding force in life, "You the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul with all your strength and with all your might, and love your neighbor as yourself."

St. John goes one step further, stating that "God *is* Love". What does that mean? Is he equating God with *human* love? No, certainly not. Human love might be able to change human society for the better. In that way it has a certain power, but it is absurd to imagine human love creating the universe, which Catholic theology ascribes to God. Instead, it is a reference to the Divine Trinity itself, the three Persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – separate "whos" united in one Divine nature. It is three persons always in a perfect loving relationship with one another, whose perfectly willing the good of another unites them. As St. John of the Cross describes it "As the Lover and the Beloved, each lived in the other. And the Love that is one with them, binds them." This gives content to the phrase that God is Love! It is God's love that boils over into Creation, and becomes for a love for Creation itself, and a calling for Creation to respond to love with love.

There is a great deal of confusion in this, but a great deal of beauty and attraction as well. Again, what role could such an attraction play, if it were not true? Why do we admire a willingness to sacrifice our lives for our loved ones, even while most of us would probably be far too fearful to actually do it?

Lastly, if God is love, it is clear that He loves us. This is of course most evident in Jesus incarnation and sacrifice on the Cross. Again, St. John of the Cross on the incarnation, "In perfect love, this law holds: that the lover become like the one loves." Or Jesus in St. John's gospel, "There is no greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Beyond the biblical, my own experience (which I know best) makes it quite evident to me that God loves me. Most of this is due to small things in my life, from my parents to family and friends. I will detail some of this below, but I also want to share a deeply spiritual experience that I had. It was so new that I am certain it came from outside of me. About two years ago, I was in Mass. It was an ordinary Mass like thousands of others I've been to, but at some point I a woman in front of me with a small, but very thick, photo album. I was curious, and I looked and I noticed that she had newspaper clippings of random people that she was praying for. I was touched by the kindness of the woman, and I thought how beautiful it was that someone would pray with such dedication for someone else she didn't even know. At that point, a wave came over me. It was a strange reaction, but I suddenly felt so unworthy to live in a world with such love and beauty. It was then that, I was pierced to the heart, and I felt His presence. Who was I, with all my failings, selfishness, sin, egoism, fears, doubts, hate to live in such a world? It was an unworthiness, but it was also true. I have never suffered from low self-esteem, but this can only be described as a feeling of total unworthiness and nothingness. And

these words went through my head, “All is grace”, and I continued to feel this unworthiness but at the same time I felt profound joy and peace. I don’t know that I’d ever read that or heard that phrase anywhere before, but I understood it. It meant that the truth was that I was really nothing except by the grace of God, and yet by the grace of God I was loved despite my nothingness. Completely unmerited. I can tell you that it was a real experience, not something merely psychological. For the next few hours, I walked around with a clarity I had never had. And this moment stayed with me in my every day mindset for at least a few weeks, and I still remember it. Like the feeling of God’s presence during my seizure, this experience remains a source of encouragement to me in dark times. Despite the fact that there is pain and suffering everywhere in the world, God is in control on a very deep level.

Beyond this one event, I see lots of smaller signs of God’s providence in my own life. One can see this in the way the world is and in nature itself. But I also see answered prayers. Of course, not in the simplistic way that you imagine as a small child. God is not a vending machine, but he does will what is good for us. He doesn’t always give us what we want, but what is good for us. I remember at many moments of life, for example, praying that a girl might find me attractive or a relationship I had might work out. How foolish, since God had my wife and children planned out for me. So, it is not a simple vending machine causality that discerns answered prayers, although there are times when those happen as well. But one can look back on one’s life and discern purpose in it, and in my case, I think in very surprising ways. Again, with my wife’s words in mind, I worry that you will feel left out if you haven’t had these experiences, but I think simple reflection and you will recognize having had these experiences in your life.

I’ll use my education and career as an example.

- In the first grade, they announced the kids to go to the highest reading group, and I was surprised not to be one. Afterward, they realized they’d made a mistake and included me. I was never a good student in grade school or high school. And yet, I was invited to visit Cornell, although I was unqualified. My guidance counselor was contacted. Within a few weeks of the start of school, I was admitted off the waitlist with funding to enter Cornell. The next step was graduate school, and once again, I was not a good student as an undergraduate. I was admitted to Chicago but without funding, and I decided to take time off before attending. In the meantime, I got a C- in computational methods my last semester.
- Two years later, I was again admitted but without funding. I hoped to be able to earn funding, but a B in Heckman’s class left me below the needed GPA. I went to Heckman’s office because an assignment had been miscounted (I’d earned 96 points, but they’d added it up wrong to 92.) Jim assured me that four points wouldn’t matter; the problem was that I hadn’t turned an assignment in. But what Jim thought was a “missing assignment” was actually the graded assignment I was holding, and he recalculated it as an A. After that Laurel told me that I’d wind up working with Jim, and I said, “No way”, but he wound up my advisor. And I got funded the rest of the way.
- Then the job market came, and I did much worse than my advisors anticipated, but I found a job at Ohio State, where I was able to be close to my sister, and also close enough to commute and see Juhi, whom I wasn’t even dating when I took the job.

- Still publishing at Ohio State was difficult. I never published my dissertation, and it was several years before I even got a positive referee report on anything. Luckily, I got three extra years because of child births. The only reason I got the third extension was because the Board of Trustees changed the policy to allow for a third tenure clock stoppage, and this happened while Juhi was pregnant with our third.
- I needed every minute I could get, as entering my 9th year, I had only three publications. But three weeks before my department was scheduled to vote, I got two papers accepted into the AER. Nevertheless, I went to Notre Dame because I had already visited, expecting to get turned down by Ohio State.
- I also remember telling my student Virgiliu to submit his job market paper to *Econometrica* because I explained that you had a chance to win the Frisch Medal, since there were few empirical papers published. A couple years later, we won the Frisch Medal. In two short years, I had gone from small chance at tenure to being recognized in the profession. And yet, in true form, they misspelled my name on the original award announcement and also misstated the paper as Townsend and Kaboski in the awards ceremony. Both were good ways of humbling me.

All of this, I see as God's providence helping me to have what I need for what he wants of me, not necessarily what I want, and reminding me that none of my career has been my own doing but rather His Grace.

I could say the same thing about my family life. You probably remember that I dated Laurel for a long time, and I struggled with what God wanted of me, especially after we broke up. My meeting of Juhi was too unique to not be providential. It was the summer after I had defended, and I was planning to go to Zambia in a couple weeks. She asked me to the fireworks in passing – the first time she had ever asked a guy out. As you probably remember, I knew from that night that she was the one for me. I felt like I'd known her my whole life, and there were too many things in her life and in my life that had led up to our meeting. These involved good things but also tragedies in her life and my family, and some of them just coincidences. I simply knew that God had made us for each other, and it wasn't simply foolish infatuation. I was never a hyper romantic person. It is now 18 years later, and I still say that I knew her from the moment we first dated.

The same goes for my children. When Juhi was pregnant with our oldest son, Andy, I had a very strange dream. I dreamt that we had our son, and he came out and I was holding him, he started to speak, and I was thrilled that he was so young and already starting to speak. Slowly, he started to speak more and more to a point where it became unnatural and, in fact, the dream turned into a nightmare dream, and I woke up in a panic. Well, my son Andy did wind up being extremely smart, and yet perhaps unnaturally so, with an autistic side that is quite challenging and difficult. Throughout his life, I have always felt encouragement that God let me know what was coming. He gave me that dream, so I could rest assured that he was the one in charge.

For John Paul, things were quite different. I was quite surprised by his diagnosis. In fact, it shook my faith and foundation for a while. I was scared I would never really know him or have a real relationship with him. I would pray fervently and ask God things like, "What will

John Paul be like in heaven? Will he have autism, or will he be whole?" Here God never answered me ahead of time, but he answered my prayers over time. I do have a wonderful relationship with John Paul, and I love him precisely for who he is. John Paul is a saintly kid in many ways, and he is a bit of a rock for his brothers and sister despite being developmentally behind. They realize that he is exceptionally sweet and loving. I don't know what his future holds, but God has assured me that there is no reason to fear.

When Juhi was pregnant with my second son, Tommy, we were told that at our second checkup, that Tommy was not growing at a normal rate. We prayed and prayed, and at the a week later, he was fine according to the measurements. Perhaps this was a mistake at some point, but it made Juhi and I greatly value our healthy son. Our daughter Claire was healthy throughout, but we also cherished her as a gift. I see Providence at work in all of this.

One more story. When we moved from Columbus to Indiana in 2010, we left my sister and her family in Columbus. Around 2012, my sister had her fourth child, and then a heart attack and severe health conditions. We tried helping, but it was hard to do from so far away. One night I woke up panicked and worried about my sister, both of which are very rare things for me to do. My confirmation sponsor told me that if you wake up anxious, you should pray the prayer that Eli told Samuel, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." I did that, but I didn't hear any response. I thought, "Maybe God is telling me to help my sister." I decided to look for available jobs at Notre Dame, and I found one that was a good match, and emailed it to my sister. Unbeknownst to me, my sister Karen had woken up that same night worried about her job, and thinking, "I've got to make a change." She got on her computer, and saw my email arrive. The job was perfect, and she applied for it. Around 80 people applied, but they hired my sister. Our families have both lived in the same area, and although her job hasn't been the easiest, it has been wonderful for the families. Meanwhile, my brother Tom decided to join us in 2015, and he telecommuted. A year later his third child was born at 25 weeks. He was not supposed to make it, but they were in hospitals for about two years. My sister cooked for them every other night, and they really could never have done it without family nearby. His son Matthew is now healthy and nearing 3 years old, and my brother has taken a new job out of state.

It is impossible for me not to see God's guidance in all of this. If it were my simply telescoping a self-made purpose onto my life, I'm not sure why I would be able to do that immediately, and then change my mind. Instead, I recognize some things immediately. Other things I am told in advance, and yet don't understand. Other things I can only appreciate in hindsight. Again, it is not only apparent blessings that I attribute to God, but, no, there is a providence in all of life. It is a reminder not only that God has something in store for each of us, a purpose, but that God has deep love for each and every one of us.

What follows is a note that I wrote for my oldest son when he was about 12. It is referenced in the above reflection, and so I include it below.

I thought of five ways that we can know or understand right and wrong. Here they are.

1. Moral "sense"

The first level or way of knowing that there is a right and a wrong is to sense it. It is an innate sense of right and wrong. For example, if you see someone hurt another person and make that person cry, you feel a small sadness yourself, and so you sense that it is not right. This is called empathy. It is true that sometimes we get pleasure out of seeing someone else sad, but we wouldn't want to see extreme suffering and pain. And we naturally assume that people should be considerate of our own feelings.

Empathy is not the only way you sense right and wrong. Most people have an innate sense of fairness and justice. So, for example, if Tommy gets two pieces of pizza, and you only got one, you would be angry because it would be unjust. It is true, that if you got the two pizzas, and Tommy only got one, you would not be angry, but there is more at stake than just the extra piece of pizza. Your getting the extra piece of pizza would not make you as happy, as Tommy getting the extra piece of pizza would make you unhappy. That's because you would know it was unfair.

The point is that it is more than simply saying you don't like it. For example, if someone stole $100 dollars from me, I wouldn't like it for two reasons: 1) I have $100 less than I used to, and 2) because it is unjust. If I got pulled over for speeding on the road, and a policeman gave me a ticket for $100, I would not be as angry. I would still have $100 dollars less, but I would realize that it was fair on some level, so the second factor would not be there.

We consider *intention* as part of our sense of justice. If we accidentally bumped into a wall and hurt ourselves, we might be annoyed, but we don't get angry at the wall because we know the wall isn't a person who acts intentionally. If someone bumped into us and hurt us, we would be angry, however, because the person should have moved out of the way. So we realize the person should have not bumped into us. If we then realize the person did it on purpose, we get even angrier.

Empathy and justice also interact. For example, if Nathaniel hits Jacob but Jacob hit Nathaniel first, and we see Jacob cry, we have less sympathy for Jacob because we see that Jacob deserved it more. If there was someone who was innocent who was hit, we have more sympathy for them.

Beyond empathy and justice, people also have an innate value for truth. We don't like if we hear someone say something untrue nor do we like ourselves to say something untrue. It is even worse, if we or someone else knowingly says something untrue. We like for both our understanding and our facts to correspond to the truth. So truth and honesty are things we "feel" are right.

So it seems that we have a built-in sense of empathy, justice, and truth. Violations of these things just make us feel morally uncomfortable. This is different than feeling uncomfortable just because

we are shy, for example. If we tell a lie, there is a part of us that feels uncomfortable about it. Part of this is because we worry about being caught, but even if won't get caught, we feel uncomfortable. The same is true if we are unjust to someone or if we hurt someone. It is unsettling for us to watch someone suffer and die, for example, even on a video.

Of course, our moral senses are not perfect, and they are not completely innate. For one thing, our moral sense can become insensitive when we continually do the wrong thing. This is analogous to our sense for spicy food. If we eat lots of spicy food, we get used to it, and the spiciness isn't as strong to us. For example, if you keep telling a lie, then eventually you start believing it yourself at some level. This happens even in our thoughts, where we sometimes lie to ourselves by making excuses. If you constantly do mean things, they don't seem so bad, even though they still are. People that are abused as children get used to seeing it, and they often end up abusing other people themselves. People in wars, have a hard time valuing human life properly. In this way, people's moral sense can become kind of numb or deadened.

There are other ways, where we strengthen our moral sense, however. For example, it isn't good for adults to be naked around each other (especially strangers) because they might be sexually tempted. It is also true that most grown ups would be extremely uncomfortable, even humiliated, to be naked around each other, especially in the wrong situation. For example, in a locker room it would be okay, but if I were naked or saw someone naked walking down the street it would be very uncomfortable. But this is not the case for very little children like Dando. He would probably run around naked without any embarrassment. That is something that is probably learned over time, where our moral sense usually becomes sharper rather than deader.

2. Reaction of Others

The second way we can know right and wrong is by the reaction of others. This is helpful, especially for people who don't have a strong internal sense of right and wrong.

For example, consider if Jacob hits Tommy, Tommy might cry, and if Jacob has empathy, he might realize that it's a wrong thing to do. But if he didn't have empathy, he would realize that hitting Tommy is not a good thing to do because Tommy might hit him back. It might be that Tommy can't hit him back that hard, but still Jacob probably wouldn't want to make an enemy. This is the second way, we can know right and wrong.

Part of this is just feelings. We usually feel good when people like or admire us, and we feel bad when people are angry or disappointed in us, so we can see the behaviors that make others admire or like us, and the behaviors that make people angry, disappoint people, or make others hate us. Similarly, we feel gratitude and appreciation when people are nice to us, and we tend to be nice back, which reinforces good behaviors. On the other hand, we feel anger, vengeance, or scorn when people do bad things, and so this helps prevent people from doing bad things.

There are also actual physical consequences. If we are mean to someone, they might not help us in the future, whereas if we are nice to that person, they might help us in the future. If we steal things or kill someone, we will get put in jail, etc. If we hit our brothers and sisters, or we throw

a fit for no reason (which is unjust to everyone else) we might get a toy taken away or get spanked. If I drive too fast in a park, which puts other people in potential danger, I might get a ticket.

Sometimes the physical consequences might not even match the severity of what we did. For example, if I were unfair to someone, he might attack me. Sometimes, people get killed for trying to steal something. The killing is worse than the stealing, but it does show that there are physical reinforcers. Even if a person is violent and crazy, it is much more likely that a crazy person would attack someone who is mean to them than attack someone who is nice.

3. Using Reason

If we don't like relying on feelings or other's reactions, and we know sometimes feelings can be deadened and sometimes other's people's reactions can also be wrong, how else can we know right or wrong? Using reason is a third way, and a higher level for knowing right and wrong. Being able to know right and wrong through reason is called "natural law", and the idea is it is the laws of right and wrong that we can know simply by thinking about the nature of people, human life, and the world we live in. We can think about what kind of behavior makes a person the best person he could be and what kind of behavior makes a society the best society it could be. Using reason to study right and wrong is a whole field of study called morality or ethics.

It is pretty clear that even though right and wrong can often be tied to feelings, right means something different than "This makes me happy" or "I like this", and wrong means something different than "That makes me sad or angry" or "I hate that". If I say, "Indian food tastes awful", it is very different than saying, "Eating Indian food is wrong". If I say, "People taste awful", it is very different than saying, "Eating people is wrong"! A preference of liking or hating is something personal, whereas right and wrong are objective and universal. When you say, "Indian food tastes awful", you mean that is true for you, but when you say "Eating people is wrong", you mean that is true for everyone.

Lots of right and wrong can be reasoned out by what would lead to a good society if everyone behaved that way. If everyone hit people, for example, it would be a very dangerous society. If people took things that didn't belong to them, then no one could be safe in their property. In that case, no one would work hard because they couldn't be sure they'd keep whatever they earned, and they would have to spend all their time protecting the things that belonged to them. If no one worked hard, we would all starve to death, so work must be a good thing. But that means that respecting people's property is also a good thing. Being honest is also good. If everyone told lies, then we wouldn't be able to tell truth from lies. We would have to learn everything for ourselves because we couldn't trust anyone else. This would make it hard for us to learn anything, since most of what we've learned is accumulated over many generations rather than just one person's life.

Another way to reason what is right and wrong is to think about what makes a good person. The nature of a knife is to cut, and so the a good knife is a knife that cuts well. One aspect of the nature of a person is reason, so a good person is one who uses his reason well. Again, this is an argument for why people should be honest – to use their reason well. Another part of man's nature is to be social creatures. I mentioned that human beings have to cooperate to survive. Some animals are

able to live on their own at birth. People need to raise children, etc. We build complex societies, where people all play different roles and interact with each other. In that way, a good person is one who does social things well: is kind, helpful, respectful, etc. This is right, and the opposite is wrong.

4. Seeing a Deeper Sense of Right and Wrong

When we see trends in scientific observations, our minds perceive order in all of it. When you see that things fall, and you see that there seems to be a rule or law of gravity. Or that light or energy follows certain scientific laws.

If we think about the fact that we are all born with some moral sense, and that the world is structured so that the reactions of others reinforce these understandings of right and wrong, and we see that reason shows that doing right things leads to good people and good societies, we can see some order in all of this.

Moral laws seem to be part of the universe and human nature, but they are
a little different from scientific laws. People cannot choose to disobey the law of gravity, but people can choose whether to follow moral laws or not. Still, if people do right, they seem to lead to good outcomes, and if they do wrong they are less happy. In that sense, it seems to be a law of human behavior. Moral laws are more like the laws of music. You can violate them, but it leads to a perceptible lack of harmony.

Why do these laws exist, and where do they come from? They are not just things that people can choose; you cannot say that a society will be good if people are dishonest or kill people, for example. The world is made this way, however, and we think it tells us something about God, the author of the universe. Scientific laws teach us that God is orderly, intelligent, and that the universe has purpose. Moral laws tell us what God wants us to do with our life.

I personally think that God made the moral laws intelligible so that doing the right thing *usually* leads to the best outcome for us in the obvious way. For example, if we are honest, people will trust us. But there are times when doing the right thing actually leads us to suffer. For example, if we are honest that we did something that deserves punishment. But God makes it self-reinforcing most of the time, so that we can develop the habit and trust, so that we can do the right thing even when it might lead to suffering. It is in these more difficult times that we can show our trust, faith, and love in God. The extreme and best case of this is what Jesus and the martyrs did, in sacrificing their lives, trusting that God was just and his love would save them even after death!

5. Believing Authority as a Source of Wisdom

The last way that we can know is to trust what we've been told. As I mentioned most of what we know, we believe based on authority. I have never been to Australia, but I assume Australia exists because people I trust have told me so. The same goes for the planet Saturn or hydrogen atoms. I also can never know that George Washington existed, but I trust it based on what has been passed down from trustworthy people.

When it comes to right and wrong, I believe a lot of what my parents told me because they were good people, and I learned that if I followed Grandma and Pop-Pop's advice, things usually turned out better for me. I also saw that they loved me, and so they weren't trying to trick me. I also realized that it was probably the same with Grandma and Pop-Pop and their own parents. This wisdom about right and wrong must have been good for them over many, many generations because otherwise people would have changed it.

There are lots of things that are just very difficult to learn, even if we have many generations. An easy example is to know what God wants. But the arguments I made for Grandma and Pop-Pop are also true for the Church: I've known priests and bishops, and they have almost always been very trustworthy. I also realize that the Church itself has lasted for centuries, while most human institutions – even countries – disappear. It must have been doing something right, and when you read the lives and writings of the saints, you see the same. This is even more true, when you read about Jesus. Jesus is God's Revelation of who He is. Jesus says very unusual things sometimes, but you also see that he was a very unusual person. People that have followed him have been happy. The people who followed him were very common people like fisherman, and they didn't seem to have much special about them, but they changed the world, so that gives me even more faith that it was Jesus and not the people themselves that led to this. I myself have seen that certain things that I didn't understand when I was young, I followed them anyway, and they have worked out.