

# From the desk of Fr. Tim

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## This is for My Friend Who Does Not Believe in God

When speaking to a child about religion, perhaps the most basic subject is God's existence. Since children generally have a very difficult time engaging in abstract thinking it is equally hard for them to conceive of something that exists, but cannot be seen or felt. We tell them about God and usually emphasize exactly what is so hard for them. "You can't see him. He is way up in the sky, in heaven. You can't see that either." They oftentimes go looking for someone who might substitute for what they need in order to believe. The priest who is dressed in funny clothes sometimes fits the bill. A grandfather or grandmother might also do. To find something that they can relate to in their experience we use wind, because they can believe in the existence of wind, or moving air because they can feel its effects. "God is like the wind." Sometimes it helps to use this analogy. If so, we are in good company, because Jesus used it as a metaphor for the Spirit and those who are regenerated through Baptism:

*<sup>7</sup> Do not be amazed that I told you, 'You must be born from above.' <sup>8</sup> The wind <sup>1</sup> blows where it wills, and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." **John 3:7-8***

Of course, the failure to recognize God's existence is not always a matter of being unable to think in symbols, or abstractly. Those of us who believe in God's existence are sometimes amazed that a friend or relative does not. The reasons that they give are baffling, but usually come down to something similar to the confusion common to children. We are not as helpless in this situation as we might think. Rooted in our reflections on our world are a series of proofs for God's existence. In a sense these do not require a "religious experience" to be effective. They are dependent on a rational, logical argument. We will take them one by one.

These classical proofs for God's existence should be appealing for people in our age. The first is dependent on the observable truth that everything that occurs in our experience is caused by something else. Raindrops, falling rocks, sound waves, sunlight, even screaming babies, and so on, are all occurrences caused by other events or forces acting on immovable objects. The sun coming up in the morning, whistling, a ball flying through the air after being hit by a bat, as well as billions of occurrences, all have a cause. If you could climb into a time machine and begin to move backwards through time you would find the same thing. Everything that happens from love affairs to world wars has an identifiable cause or set of causes. I say that this is something convincing for our age because it is relatable to a scientific view of the universe. We can logically move backwards to the very first cause. By the way, no scientist worth his NaCl<sup>1</sup> can conceive of an effect with no cause. Nor is it convincingly possible to conceive of endless series of causes and effects with no beginning. (You can do a little research by looking up Father Georges Henri Joseph Édouard Lemaître who was a Belgian Roman Catholic priest and died in 1966. He is responsible for the Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe.)

Perhaps one of the reasons that this is both absolutely logical on the one hand and enormously difficult to accept on the other, is that it points to a person being behind the cause. The fact that

<sup>1</sup> chemical equation for table salt

this is so is also perfectly logical and scientific. Imagine a series of dominoes set in a row, all ready to fall onto the one next to it, thus forcing it to fall as well. We have all done this, but the question here is how does the first one get toppled? Let's do an experiment. We will only be able to imagine this. Set the dominoes up and do not push the first one. Just watch it and see what happens. You will be tempted to push it over, but don't. If you are exceptionally disciplined you might be able to stare at it for an hour. You might be able to leave it there for a day or even a month, but likely while you are not looking, someone in the household will pass by and be compelled to push it over. Now, two things have happened. First someone pushed it over. We can imagine non-rational forces, like earthquakes or wind or flood as being the cause for its tumble, but we can also imagine that it would not. In order to get back to the very first atom and the force that caused it, we are in a universe in which there is only one cause. There are no winds, floods or anything else, just the finger of someone who chooses to push over the domino. Here is the second thing that happens. Someone chooses. Only a "someone" can choose. Even though we ascribe this characteristic to all sorts of things, only people can choose to do something, discriminate between two courses of action. Folks who adamantly are opposed to belief in God or any sort of rational spiritual architect of the universe (radical atheism) are also very prone to saying that their pet toad decided to escape from its pond ... in order to see the world. I am sorry for this person or anyone who thinks their pet toad can do that. I can decide to do that, but no toad or rock, bad weather, sunshine, rivers or anything else in nature can decide to do that. And certainly there is not even a shred of evidence that can claim that the universe decided on its own to come into existence.

Now, there is another popular argument in favor of an explanation for the beginning of the universe that excludes any notion of God. This argument simple explains that it was an accident. In other words, the necessary forces in order for creation to take place happened accidentally. The idea of randomness is extremely difficult to prove for scientists. They have to fill in some enormous gaps that end up looking like building a match stick bridge over the Grand Canyon. You have to assume too much, like the physical forces and properties that would be necessary. Even the atomic material has got to be in place, and where did that come from. There is a first atom, so dense that it contains all the matter of the universe. It has got to be there before anything else happens, and we have already established that it cannot decide on its own to come into existence. I know that this line of argument is not convincing to a lot of people. There are two reasons that I think are behind their difficulty. First, it means that there is something purposeful to the universe. The creator has a plan. If we are going to build something in the back yard but have no idea what we are going to build, we cannot even begin. The Bible expresses this with the idea of God ordering the chaos. He has a plan. Just like with the deck or tree house in the backyard every detail expresses the plan. So is the case with the universe. Even my existence, seemingly less significant than a speck of dust, is part of this plan. For reasons that are probably more complex than the creation of the stars above, there is something in me that rebels against this idea of a plan for me. I want to be the captain of my destiny. So, I imagine that if I don't believe in God and his plan then I can make up my own reason for my existence. I can be the god of my little world. The second reason is similar to the first. We can find from examining the world we live in that the plan formed by God requires something of us. I have noticed something very interesting about this. People who reject God's involvement take several different directions in life. Some become radical environmentalists, extreme protectors of nature. They do not accept the idea that the earth was created for the benefit of man. They reject the idea that this is part of the plan of the creator. Earth for them becomes the object of their affection, protection and even the explanation of their existence. There is a need deep within them to identify something perfectly good about their world. They imagine the planet without the evil and destructive influences of man. Suddenly

the earth is transformed into a rational entity with certain rights. The systemic perfection of creation is certainly subject to the evil acts. The wonton destruction on the part of man is well known. The idea, however, that the goodness of the earth is being violated raises a new set of questions. Who said it is good? Certainly the earth cannot create its own perfection. But, let's just imagine that it can.

We have come to realize how delicate is the balance of even the temperature of the huge oceans of the earth. Even the cycles of global climate changes that have been going on for eons all seem to be pointing to a perfect balance in nature, a balance that makes sense and brings about what we can positively describe as good. But who made these delicately balanced cycles? Could the earth have evolved in this way, with perfection as its goal? Not only climate changes would have to comply with this. Since every star, planet, and piece of space debris has an influence on the earth, all of them would have to be organized along these lines. The math is more than the mind can hold. But let's continue to imagine that it is so, that through a natural process that does not involve the plan of a rational creator, the earth has "selected" its course. Why then do we believe that a green, fertile earth with gentle rains and prosperous seas, a life sustaining earth, is the course that creation acting on its own would have chosen? Why? What is wrong with a desert wasteland and horrific hurricanes in the midst of a warming, rising sea? If the earth is choosing, why would it choose to sustain our life, especially since we are the evil force behind its destruction?

Of course, the Catholic answer to this question is that we should not destroy the earth because it is an offense against the good and loving creator. We should protect the earth as a loving act of appreciation for the gifts that God has given us. We should follow a course of action that uses the resources of the earth in a just manner as acts of love toward our brothers and sisters, especially those who have little access to the gift that God has provided. This makes far more sense than doing something affectionate and worshipful for an inanimate object that couldn't care less. (Oops. There we go ascribing rational choice to the earth that cannot choose.) Catholics believe that God responds to such acts of obedience and love by assigning merit to our actions, all of which point to the end of life and time.

Of course that is jumping light years ahead of the idea that a rational being created all things, according to a plan. To return to our domino analogy we might stand in awe for a moment at being on the receiving end of the last domino to fall. Every child has done this. They set up all the dominos and then push over the first. Depending on the complexity of the design, the numbers of dominos that are included, and the time that has been spent putting this together, when the last domino falls there is an immediate reaction. We shout with glee that it has worked, that the line of dominos has produced its desired effect. Now imagine that the dominos are life size and you are the last one in the line. The natural curiosity of man wonders at why the domino has fallen in front of him. There are several possibilities. First, it wanted to. It doesn't take long to consider this rather foolish as the domino lies there immobile and unable to speak. As much as you might poke it, it does not respond. Perhaps it was the domino in front of it that wanted to fall and so you ask it as well, and once again, no response. After having experienced the one falling domino, we can move through the line back to the first, the very first domino to fall in the line and we discover the same thing about it. It is mute, lacking intelligence or volition. It is an object which can only act if acted upon.

Curiosity is not, of course so readily satisfied. And so, we come up with the idea that the domino has accidentally fallen. Although this seems to fit into a modern view of the world this explanation is the least plausible. Even the rocks that fall from mountain cliffs and hit the cars going by with a certain degree of probability do so because of water and wind erosion and the forces of gravity. It is not an accident in the sense that it has no cause, but is a purely random occurrence. (Have you ever noticed by the way that the signs along the road provide two different warning messages: "Fallen Rock" and "Falling Rock"? Falling rocks are the ones to worry about but fallen rocks are the only ones we usually see. There is evidence that something happened even if we are not witnesses to it taking place.) For every effect there is a cause. Seeing that there is no wind and water acting on our domino, we at least have made one important discovery. The domino was pushed over by something other than the domino. This has been the case all along the line; one domino being pushed over by another domino. But with the last in the line this becomes significant because there are no other dominos left.

Another argument that is proposed by the modern view and that that is surprisingly common among people who do not want God to exist, is that there is in fact an endless line of dominos. They have no ending and no beginning, so there is no need of a creator. Of course, this is merely something foolish to distract us from the complete irrationality of such explanations. In the first place I am standing in front of a pile of dominos, a pile of effects stretching back to the only place the journey can go, to a first cause. Each domino is a testimony to this. It cannot resurrect itself in order to fall again, just as no minute on my clock can be recaptured. My clock is changed forever by the passage of time and all the events contained within it. One tick on the second hand is an eternal proof that standing at the end of the dominos is the one who caused it all and he is not a domino.

In reality our own experience in life is also a witness to these truths. One of the reactions that we can have standing at the end of the line of dominoes is not glee at the excitement of the line falling before us. It is fear, fear that it has ended. The last domino has fallen and we look at it with a sense of sadness. All that work of standing them end on end, carefully insuring that they are perfectly placed and do not fall by being unintentionally bumped too soon. The first one is pushed. There is a rush of excitement and then silence. If our life is like that, we should quickly ask what has been its purpose. Each of us has a beginning, just like our world has a beginning, just as the first domino started the line falling. And each of has an end. We may correctly argue that we are just one in a series of events, in a series of individuals, who make up the chain of life, but as wonderfully communal as that sounds, our own individual life has got to be the focus of our consideration. What is the meaning of my beginning and my end?

Indeed, at this point we are not going to be terribly satisfied with what we can discover with the use of the power of our reason. We will only really find a good answer by turning to the higher arena of revelation, but since we have limited ourselves here with what can be discovered using our powers of rational deduction, there is one thing. It is that the first cause of the universe must be by definition perfect. It is quite surprising that this can be discovered by the use of reason, for so many primitive religions that have existed from the earliest days of human experience have thought otherwise. Some even worshipped evil or engaged in imperfect acts in attempts to use magic or spiritual force to manipulate nature. Human sacrifice, for example, is a surprisingly common practice among primitive religions. But the very fact that we call those acts "evil" presupposes that we recognize a fundamental characteristic of the first cause, that of perfection. A bad hand in a game of cards can only be identified if we can recognize a good, even perfect hand.

An evil act can only be recognized as being such if we know there exists a perfect act. What does this say for the purpose of our life? We exist so that we can share in perfection. We may argue that in fact our whole life is a series of imperfections, and so we cannot conceive of perfection, for we have not experienced it. It may be a matter of perspective but I think it could be reasonably argued that what we have indeed experienced is a degree of perfection, a degree of goodness, a degree of beauty, a degree of truth. We hold our newborn child in our arms and even though the air will soon be pierced with their cry, we exclaim with confidence that they are perfect. Even if it is an exaggeration it points to the reality of the existence of perfection. Limited perfection can only be explained by the existence of limitless perfection.

Although it is unnecessary to the argument here, some comment might be helpful on the subject of evolution. Evolutionary theory is like so many other descriptions of the world around us. They start out as descriptions, and as so they are very valuable. But there are always those who want to turn a description into a religious dogma. The tower of Babel will forever be with us! The theory of evolution as proposed by Charles Darwin claims that plant and animal life adapt in order to insure survival by changing particular characteristics over long periods of time. What we might call the politically applied theory of evolution claims that life on earth has moved through a process of development, being directed by either chance or necessity. For its proponents this has been regarded as a completely satisfactory explanation for the history of the origin of life and nothing more is needed, certainly no divine creator and his plan. We need to go back to our dominos just one more time. We have not emphasized until now the plan involved in the line of dominos which, in fact can be seen from another angle, an intelligent force acting on each domino. The fact is that each of the occurrences in life as we experience them seem that way. Imagine driving your car down the freeway fifty years ago. Tires on cars were designed for a limited life and for a limited speed. Exceeding those limits, the tire blows out on our car and it careens into the ditch. We walk away scratching our head at the tire and the fact that we have survived. We see the experience in microcosm. But the tire manufacturer takes our experience and builds on that of others and a better tire evolves, all being directed by experience and a rational plan. We need to notice that the tire did not choose to evolve. There are forces acting upon it from the outside.

Perhaps one of the surprising things about the evidence unearthed that supports the theory of evolution is the questions that go unanswered by it. For example, during the Cambrian period (570 to 500 million years ago) of evolution there is an unexplainable explosion of diversity in the forms of different animals. The word explosion is not adequate as innumerable species appear suddenly as there is nothing in sense, reason or evolutionary plan that would require their existence. They just seem to appear. The explanation of this from the argument of chance does not help much and almost seems an explanation that is used to fill a desperate gap. And what is even more fascinating is the period of global extinction that followed, when 85% of the existing species suddenly disappeared. This is not to say that the theory of evolution is not helpful to guide our understanding of the diverse development of life. Radical evolutionists are not observers of the necessity of objectivity in the scientific method. Scientists are modern explorers who seek to discover the truth about the physical properties of our world. They do not set out to prove or disprove, but to discover. For the radical evolutionists their intent is transparently seen as a use of a scientific theory to disprove the existence of God, a pursuit that is certainly outside the scope of the physical sciences. In fact what is behind evolution is a director, his guidance of the development of life from outside itself. Just as the human species could not decide where its nose would be placed on its face, so the changes and developments in life have come in the midst of a

sea of chaos and confusion. Once again it is the rational creator, guiding from perfection the development of life.

Perhaps the words of Pope Benedict XVI would be helpful here to be sure that we are clear on the usefulness and limitation of the theory of evolution:

*Currently, I see in Germany, but also in the United States, a somewhat fierce debate raging between so-called "creationism" and evolutionism, presented as though they were mutually exclusive alternatives: those who believe in the Creator would not be able to conceive of evolution, and those who instead support evolution would have to exclude God. This antithesis is absurd because, on the one hand, there are so many scientific proofs in favor of evolution which appears to be a reality we can see and which enriches our knowledge of life and being as such. But on the other, the doctrine of evolution does not answer every query, especially the great philosophical question: where does everything come from? And how did everything start which ultimately led to man? (Comments made in a meeting of the Holy Father Benedict XVI with the clergy of the Diocese of Belluno Feltre and Treviso at Church of St. Justin Martyr, 24 July 2007)*

We should be reminded at the conclusion here that there is much that faith illumines concerning the nature of God and his plan for our world and for each one of us. Human reason contributes much to this understanding, as a sort of foundation upon which faith builds. Understand that there is no necessary conflict between faith and reason. Reason properly understood contains a truth created by God, something that we can ascertain by observing our world. Faith can be enriched by our discovery of God's truth in our world.