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## Can We Know God is Real?

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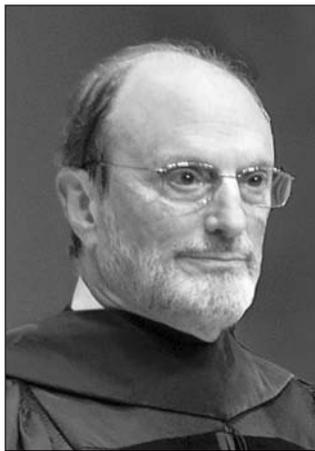
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**Editor's Note:** This paper is a transcription of Dr. Roy Clouser's convocation address at Dordt College, spring 2009.

# Can We Know God is Real?

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By Roy Clouser

**N**o one in the Western intellectual tradition can ask the question posed in my title without reference to Plato's dialogue *Theaetetus*. In that work Plato tried to sort out how we could tell those beliefs which are mere opinions from ones which we are entitled to be certain of. It was only those beliefs, the ones of which we could be certain, that he thought deserved to be called "knowledge." And notice that what he was after was certainty what

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we're *entitled* to. So it's not just a matter of our *feeling* certain; the guy who feels lucky may believe he's going to win the lottery today, but that won't entitle him to be certain of it. (As a matter of fact, if you look at the statistics, it's probably close to certainly not true.) So Plato's question was "how do we tell genuine certainty from mere opinion?"

As we think about this question and the answers that have been given to it, it might be good to keep in mind some things that are naturally taken by everyone to be certainly true. For example, no doubt you are all sure of your name, address, and telephone number. But Plato and the mainstream Western intellectual tradition following him say you're wrong! Amazingly, that tradition has concluded that not only beliefs such as your name, address, and telephone number, but also your belief that this session is now in progress—and that there is a seat under your butt—are all things you can't know for sure!

Where that tradition came out on this question can be summarized this way: you're entitled (justified, warranted) in being certain of a belief if and only if it is either self-evident or proven. Now you might be sitting there thinking "Well, so what? It's self-evident to me that my name, address, telephone number are what they are." But the Western intellectual tradition is not through. For although it has spent centuries debating the topic of what counts as a proof, it has rarely ever re-examined self-evidency for the simple reason that it was taken care of once and for all and by one of the biggest names in philosophy ever, Aristotle.

In considering self-evident knowledge, Aristotle reviews several possible objections against

there being self-evident truth, and he argues that every one of the objections fails. He then concludes by saying, “So there is self-evident truth and whatever is known in this way is a necessary truth and cannot be false.” Keep in mind that a necessary truth is a law (or a belief entailed by a law). So he’s restricting self-evident truth to law-beliefs alone. Moreover, he then adds that if you know a law self-evidently, you’re *infallibly* right. So he ends with two restrictions on the experience of seeing a belief to be self-evidently true: it can properly attach only to a law, and the resulting belief must be one which cannot possibly be false. Perhaps you can now see why he denied that your beliefs about your name, address, and telephone number, that there is a chair under your butt, and that this session is in now in progress, can be self-evident beliefs. And, of course, it’s not just those beliefs that are ruled out; so is the belief that God exists.

There is still more to the Western tradition about self-evident truth, however. In the 1600s, two more very influential thinkers, Descartes and Locke, added yet another restriction to genuinely self-evident belief. They said that a self-evident belief is one which, when understood by any normal person, is seen by that person to be self-evidently true. So I call their added restriction the “everybody requirement.” (In fact, this additional requirement acquired such widespread acceptance that it came to be regarded as the *definition* of a self-evident truth.) This means, of course, that if any normal, adult human being doesn’t see a particular belief to be self-evidently true, then it is not. So this restriction, too, rules out your name, address, and telephone number, that this session is now in progress, and that God exists. And it is because of this restriction that people for centuries have been asking Christians for their proof of God’s existence. They have said, in effect, “You claim to know God exists, but it’s obviously not self-evident. So where is your proof?” And, unfortunately, many Christians have taken that bait and tried to construct proofs. Now while I think it can be shown that not a single one of those proofs succeeds, that isn’t why I called those attempts unfortunate. I said “unfortunately” because I think there are good reasons to say that *whatever could be proven would thereby not be God*. Let me explain.

God as revealed in Scripture is the creator of

everything in the cosmos, “seen or unseen.” So that includes the laws we use to prove beliefs or theories. For that reason, trying to construct a proof of God’s existence inadvertently lowers God from being the creator of all laws to a being who is subjected to those laws. Here’s the same point put another way. Whatever can be proven using the laws of proof—whether mathematical or logical—is not the creator of the laws of proof by whom they were brought into existence. So without realizing it, the thinkers who tried to prove God’s existence did him no favor. Instead, they unintentionally demoted him to what is in fact a creaturely level of existence. And this is why I say that whatever can be proven would thereby not be God.

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Now perhaps some of you are thinking that the answer to the question of how we know God is “by faith.” Many people nowadays, when asked how they know God is real, are heard to say, “That’s part of my faith.” This answer has the merit of not falling into the trap of offering a proof, but I must say at once that I don’t think that’s right. It is not the way New Testament writers use the word

“faith.” Instead, they use it to mean exactly what you and I mean by it in our every day discourse. We ordinarily mean trusting someone to keep a promise, and they mean trusting God to keep his promises. But since you’d already have to believe a person exists in order to trust that person, the trust can’t be that there is such a person. And that’s true whether that person is another human or God. Since this is an important point, let me cite briefly one place where the New Testament confirms it. At the beginning of Hebrews 11 we read, “Now faith is the basis for the things we hope for, the grounds on which we believe and the things not yet seen.” See my point? Faith has to do with trusting God for the things he has promised us but which haven’t yet been realized, not God’s own reality. Further on, this same chapter adds this remark: “Without faith it’s impossible to please God because whoever would come to God, must believe that He exists...” —and here comes the faith part— “...and that He rewards those who seek Him.” The faith part, once again, is that He will keep his promises by rewarding those who seek Him. In the New Testament the chief of those promises is our resurrection; the promise that just as Christ was raised from the dead, so too we will be raised from the dead and will live forever in His kingdom on this earth. That hasn’t happened yet, but meanwhile we trust God’s promises that he will bring it about. So I conclude that faith in God won’t answer the question of how we know God exists because we’d already have to believe he exists in order to trust Him.

If you are tempted at this point to think that the entire subject of mere opinion versus justified certainty is foreign to the New Testament, and so should be off limits rather than taken seriously, then you need to know that its writers do at times make the distinction between mere belief and knowing for sure. There are places in the New Testament where its writers clearly do distinguish mere opinion from certitude (Luke 1.1, 10.11; John 6.69; Rom. 2.2; I Tim. 1.4; I Jn. 4.16). So it is significant that they, like the prophets before them, insist that we *know* God.

So what are we to say about that claim? If we don’t believe God is real because it’s proven, it’s ruled out as self-evident, and it’s not a matter of faith, how then can it be knowledge? What I want to propose is that our knowledge of God’s

reality is self-evident after all. I want to back that proposal with arguments to show that it’s the three restrictions on self-evidency that are in trouble, not belief in God.

Let’s examine these restrictions further, taking them in reverse order.

First, the “everybody requirement.” Descartes and Locke want us to believe that unless everybody agrees that a belief is self-evident, it’s not. So I ask, Is the “everybody requirement” self-evident? And the answer has to be “no” because it is not to me. So even if I’m the only person who doesn’t see it as self-evident, the restriction fails its own requirement. Of course, it could still count as knowledge if it could be proven. So can it be proven? The answer can only be that it’s *impossible* to prove because “everyone” has to include all the dead and the unborn. As hard as it would be to canvass the six billion people now living on earth, that’s nothing compared to canvassing the dead and the unborn. Therefore, the requirement that for a belief to be self-evidently certain everybody has to see it as so, is itself neither self-evident nor proven. Thus, it is not knowledge; it is merely somebody’s opinion.

What about Aristotle’s requirement that self-evidency attaches only to necessary truths? Well, that’s not self-evident to me either, and no one’s ever even tried to prove it, so it fails the “everybody requirement.” But that’s not all. It also fails its own requirement because the requirement that a self-evident belief be a necessary truth is not itself a necessary truth. It neither has a self-contradictory denial, nor is it entailed by a necessary truth. And the whole while that this restriction fails to acquit itself, we and everyone else in fact experience our normal perceptions of the world around us to be self-evidently true (like the chair being under our butt and the fact that this session is now in progress).

Finally, let’s consider the requirement that to be self-evidently true a belief would have to be *infallibly* true. My first reaction is to say that infallibility belongs only to God, and for humans to desire it is an instance of sin. There is nothing about us that is infallible. Normal perception reliably gives us truth, but it is not infallible. Reasoning can also give us truth, but it is not infallible either. Just so, there is no reason to doubt that intuitions of self-evidency give us truth, but they do so without having to be infallible. There

is nothing about us that just *can't* be wrong. But that doesn't matter because we don't need to be infallible in order to be certain. To see why this is so, take the example of normal perception. You and I know that our perceptual capabilities are not infallible; we know that we can be fooled and that there are such things as hallucinations and realistic dreams. But you are certain that you're hearing (or reading) these words right now, aren't you? And you are certain that you're sitting here. You don't have to be infallible to know those things any more than you have to be infallible to know that one and one make two, to know your name, address, and telephone number . . . or to know God.

The upshot of all this is that instead of letting the grand masters of the intellectual tradition sit on the top of Mt. Olympus and send down orders about what they will permit us to count as self-evident, they should be quiet and let us tell them what we in fact experience to be self-evident. (If you think that last sentence was hyperbole, it's wasn't. Oxford philosopher Anthony Quentin, in his book *Metaphysics*, says that restrictions have to be put on self-evidency, or people will be telling us that their moral and religious beliefs are self-evident.) The unmitigated arrogance of that!

But is this idea of self-evidency really the same as the experience of conversion as described in the New Testament? To see that this is so, recall that experiencing a belief to be self-evident has long been described in visual metaphors by those who wrote about it. Philosophers, mathematicians, and logicians, etc., have spoken about "seeing" the truth or about being "enlightened," for example. So I call your attention to the ways the New Testament speaks in these same visual metaphors about acquiring belief in God: it speaks of the "eyes" of our "understanding" being opened, about the "light of the gospel" shining into "hearts that had been darkened." It speaks of the Holy Spirit as removing a person's "blindness" so that he or she sees the gospel to be the truth about God from God. In these ways it clearly makes belief in God's reality a result of experience: the experience of directly seeing it to be the truth. So I conclude that what has been called self-evidency in math and logic is the same sort of experience as what is called "enlightenment" in the New Testament.

Let me add, however, that putting our belief in God's reality on this basis doesn't mean we

can never have doubts or misgivings about that experience. That happens with respect to truths of math and logic, and with respect to normal sense perceptions, and it can happen with respect to belief in God. Nor does saying that God is known because his reality is self-evident mean that we can't sometimes feel far away from God. That is every believer's experience. But it does mean that the basis upon which we claim to know God's reality is the same as that upon which we know that one and one make two and that this address is now in progress.

I'll close by reading from two writers who saw all this clearly. The first is John Calvin, who puts it this way:

As to the question "how shall we be persuaded that scripture came from God," it's just the same as if we were asked "how shall we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter?" Scripture bears upon the face of it as clear evidence of its truth as do white and black of their color, sweet and bitter of their taste." (*Inst.* 1.7.2)

Those who strive to build up firm faith in scripture by argument are doing things backward. Even if anyone could clear God's sacred word from man's evil accusations, He will not at the same time imprint upon their hearts the certainty that piety requires. For unbelieving men, religion seems to stand by opinion alone. And so in order not to believe anything foolishly or lightly, they wish and demand rational proof that Moses and the prophets spoke by divine inspiration. But I reply that the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reasoning. Scripture carrying its own evidence along with it deigns not to submit to proofs and arguments but owes the full conviction with which we ought to receive it to the testimony of the Spirit of God." (*Inst.* 1.7.4)

Blaise Pascal takes the same position but phrases it another way:

We know truth not only by reasoning but also by the heart, and it is in this last way that we know first principles; and reason, which has no art in it, tries in vain to impugn them.... [For example] we know we do not [now] dream... however impossible it is for us to prove it by reason.... The knowledge of first principles of space, time, motion and number is as sure as any

of those we can get by reasoning. And reason must trust these intuitions of the heart and base every argument upon them.” (*Pensees*, trans. AJ Kralisheimer [London: Penguin, 1966], 58)

He then closes the same paragraph this way:

[T]herefore those to whom God has imparted religion by intuition are fortunate, and justly convinced. (Remember, justified belief is knowledge.)

My conclusion, then, is that when we are asked “how do we know God’s real?” the right answer is that his existence is self-evident to us. And if someone else replies “Well, it’s not to me,” the answer to that is, “Right. And that’s why you don’t believe it. But there is a way you can find out if it is. You can try reading the Gospel of John and see if you find anything in it to be self-evident truth.” The rest is in God’s hands.