Inhabiting Reality
A Relational Framework

José Soto[1]

> *We human beings are unable to survive, and certainly cannot thrive, unless we can make meaning. If life is perceived as utterly random, fragmented, and chaotic—meaningless— we suffer confusion, distress, stagnation, and finally despair. The meaning we make orients our posture in the world, and determines our sense of self and purpose. We need to be able to make some sort of sense out of things; we seek pattern, order, coherence, and relation in the dynamic and disparate elements of our experience.*
> —Sharon Daloz Parks[2]

How, then, do we make sense of life and reality—of "the disparate elements of our experience"? What is reality?

In a word, reality is *everything:* all that exists, all that is true, and all that is real. It includes *us* (the persons asking the question), the world of which we're a part, and the ultimate order-of-things (reality as a whole, and what it all means). In what follows, we'll get an overview of reality in precisely those terms: an approach to reality *from within.*[3]

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[1] This is the essay version of an online discussion by José Soto: "Inhabiting Reality," Wayfinders, June 12, 2021, https://www.wayfinders.quest/inhabiting-reality.html.

[2] Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 9.

[3] Sociologist Christian Smith explains the need "to replace the too-dominant image of humans as primarily *perceivers of* reality with the image of humans as *natural participants in* reality." The prevalent "background view of the human condition … supposes humans as cut off from the real … as somehow exiled from the true reality within which they live, primarily because of the alleged epistemic limitations of language." He explains that "this belief in our inescapably alienated condition was set up for us in part by Immanuel Kant's key distinction between 'noumenal' reality and 'phenomenal' reality—a disastrous move driven by a desire to preserve morality in a world of Newtonian determinism—that is, between things 'as they really are in themselves' and things as they merely appear to us. Noumenal reality no doubt exists out there, this account supposes, but we humans have no good access to it because all of our knowledge is limited by our restricted capacities of empirical perceptions. The only world we can ever reside in is the world of appearances. We are separated from the world as it really is by an unbridgeable epistemic chasm." But "quite to the contrary, we humans are fully *participants in* reality, a reality that is not identical to us but still fully ours. We emerge from, consist of, belong to, and are intricately connected with the totality of reality, material and otherwise. … Because we belong to and participate in reality, because we 'indwell' reality, as Michael Polanyi said, rather than merely observing it, over the years we develop a profound 'tacit knowledge' of what reality is and how reality works. 'We know more than we can tell,' Polanyi observes. 'It is not by looking at things, but by dwelling in them, that we understand

Introduction

Given that we ourselves are part of reality, we're going to explore it from within—through the lens of our experience in the world. It's going to look a little different from the picture of reality we mapped in our last discussion, but we'll see the same reality, only from a different angle.[4]

Let's break it all down into three main realms or domains: the *existential* (all that pertains to ourselves as individual persons and agents in the world), the *situational* (what's going on in the world, the nature of things, and how the world works), and the *normative* (the ultimate order-of-things, or the larger Story by which we live our lives—whether that includes spiritual realities or not).[5]

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their . . . meaning.' Thus, the real we seek to know is therefore not fundamentally concealed or removed from us. We are more than intimately part of it. It composes us. We participate in its natural operations. We are thus terrifically well positioned to know and understand it." Christian Smith, *What Is a Person?: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 170–71, quoting Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1983), 4, 18.

[4] For the "last discussion" referenced here, see José Soto, "Traction on Reality," Wayfinders, June 12, 2021, https://www.wayfinders.quest/traction-on-reality.html.

[5] This way of breaking things down is not intended as an *ontology:* these three categories are not intended as domains of *reality* per se, but as domains of the *human experience of* reality. There's clearly overlap though, since these categories are also *aspects* of reality from a human perspective. I'm also not presuming that this schema is universal. Although I find these categories natural and helpful, I also assume that they may not seem so natural to some. So, consider this framework not so much an ontology, but *a way* to make sense of reality *from within*. Of course, there are countless ways one could legitimately frame reality. Not only that but "there is near unanimity that the three basic domains of reality are *nature* (organic and inorganic matter), *sentient minds* (possessing conscious mental states) and *culture* (the product of the interplay of sentient minds and nature)." Andrew Wright, *Religious Education and Critical Realism: Knowledge, Reality and Religious Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 202. However, this bottom-up schema that has emerged for me seems to me the most natural and appropriate for what I call a *phenomenology of life* (exploring and describing reality from within)*,* which is what I have in mind for this project. If I was approaching reality as an object, from the outside (so to speak), rather than as *an agent* and participant within it, then I might have chosen the *nature/sentient minds/culture* schema, depending on the nature of my project. But if my project was to include the *metaphysical/spiritual* dimension of reality, as this one does, then that framework wouldn't be broad enough for it. Currently, I am subsuming the *nature/sentient minds/culture* schema within the *situational* domain in this framework.

There were various sources and approaches to reality that influenced the development of this framework. The most obvious is probably theologian John Frame's *tri-perspectivalism,* as explained in his book *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987). In his approach, all knowing has three aspects or perspectives: the existential, the situational, and the normative (the normative being God's word or law). However, as philosopher Esther Meek explains, "knowing God's law need not be the only way to construe the normative with respect to knowing God. It may be, and has been so widely in the Christian church throughout the ages and the world, *knowing the definitive story*." Esther Lightcap Meek, *Loving to Know: Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 162, n. 27 (emphasis mine). I am clearly taking the "normative" perspective in the broader sense of "the definitive story" or *the big picture*, where we ask the big questions of meaning, faith and God. Other sources I could mention include Abraham J. Heschel, a Jewish theologian and philosopher, who says that

It is also widely recognized that reality is *relational* in nature, that everything is connected, and everything affects everything else.[6] So we'll approach our three categories in relational terms, breaking things down in terms of our relationship to *ourselves*, our relationships to *others* (and to nature), and our relationship to *life itself* and our place in the universe.[7]

"the self, the fellow-man and the dimension of the holy are the three dimensions of a mature human concern." Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 139. Similarly, Dutch Catholic priest Henri Nouwen speaks of "the three movements of the spiritual life," which are "our innermost self," "our fellow human," and "our God." Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1986), 13. Protestant theologian David Ford also discerns these three domains: he calls them the "interiority-inside view," "the middle distance" (or "ordinary face-to-face"), and the "wide-angle overview." Ford, *The Drama of Living: Becoming Wise in the Spirit* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2014), 51ff. By the way, at some point I'd like to explore how this three-tier framework that has emerged for me relates to the findings in studies of *semiotics*. "A paradigm oriented to a categorical theory of sign processes" (Stefan Alkier) would seem potentially useful for a framework driven by *meaning* and sensemaking. See, for example, how Stefan Alkier describes reality from within that framework: "reality, by which life, feeling, and thinking are determined, encompasses *all three dimensions of experience:* the first level of emotional, precritical perception; the second level of empirical-historical facts; and the third level of interpretation constitutive of meaning, which opens up connections." Stefan Alkier, *The Reality of the Resurrection: The New Testament Witness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), paragraph 8, Introduction. Kindle ed (emphasis mine). This seems to me another way of looking at reality from within.

[6] Sharon Daloz Parks, for example, speaks of "the relational dimension of all life" (*Big Questions, Worthy Dreams,* 101); Similarly, Charlene Spretnak speaks of "the deeply relational nature of reality." Spretnak, *Relational Reality: New Discoveries of Interrelatedness That Are Transforming the Modern World* (Topsham, ME: Green Horizon Books, 2011), 1; Timothy Jennings speaks of "the law of love" in all creation. Jennings, *The God-Shaped Brain: How Changing Your View of God Transforms Your Life* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2017), 24ff; Stanley Grenz describes the biblical metanarrative as "The Story of God Establishing Community." Stanley J. Grenz, "The Universality of the Jesus-Story" and the "Incredulity Toward Metanarratives," in *No Other Gods before Me?: Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions*, ed. John G. Stackhouse Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), under the heading "The Christian Claim to Universality," Kindle ed. See also Iain McGilchrist, "God, the Brain, and Paradox" (The Laing Lectures 2016, Regent College, Vancouver, B.C., Canada, March 9–10, 2016, https://www.regent-college.edu/lifelong-learning/laing-lectures/laing-lectures-2016). For the best presentation I know of from a biblical perspective, see Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005): "Israel's God is a relational God who has created a world in which interrelatedness is basic to the nature of reality. … The world of the Hebrew Bible is a spiderweb of a world. Interrelatedness is basic to this community of God's creatures. Each created entity is in symbiotic relationship with every other and in such a way that any act reverberates out and affects the whole, shaking this web with varying degrees of intensity. Being the gifted creatures that they are, human beings have the capacity to affect the web in ways more intense and pervasive than any other creature, positively and negatively, as we know very well in our own time" (chap. 1, under sec. "A Relational Creator and a Relational World," Kindle ed.).

[7] The aim of this framework is to facilitate discussions about the nature of reality across worldviews. It allows for all plausible aspects and dimensions of reality, so that there's room for them during our investigation. My own natural (and Christian) way of approaching reality is explained in José Soto, *Reality According to the Scriptures: Initial Reflections* (Natick, MA: Wayfinders Publishing House, forthcoming 2022), ch. 1: "A Christian Approach to Reality."

Life in Our Skin

Let's start with the existential domain, which is our personal experience of life in all its complexity. It includes not just our experience, but also the *actuality* of everything that is part of *me* as an individual. Let's call it *life in our skin.*[8]

Life in our skin includes obvious realities like our bodies and all that goes on in our consciousness, but also more elusive ones like our sense of self and purpose. In this aspect of things, we ask everyday questions like: *How am I doing?* and *Why am I feeling this way?* But also bigger questions like: *What do I want?* and *Who am I?*

Notice the focus on our *subjective experience,* which is never left out of sight in this project, given our experiential approach. But our judgement on that subjective experience is grounded on clear understanding of objective realities: *human nature* (physiology, sex, health and fitness, language ability and creativity, mortality and spirituality), *personhood* (identity formation,

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[8] To help put this framework into perspective, I will compare each of my three aspects of reality to the three "domains of reality" in *critical realism.* I'll do it with the help of Andrew Wright's analysis of Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (London: Verso, 1997), in Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism: Ambiguity, Truth and Theological Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 2012). I'll make the corresponding correlations as we go, beginning now with what I'm calling *life in our skin.* This existential or personal dimension of reality seems to correspond to "the empirical domain" of reality in *critical realism,* as distinguished by Roy Bhaskar. Similar to my *life in our skin,* the empirical domain is "the sphere of our personal experiences of the world" (Wright, p. 67). The difference between the two, however, is that *life in our skin* includes *actualities* also, not just our experiences of them. Wright explains that "such experiences are epistemically limited, since we are capable of error and self-deception, and direct unmediated apprehension of an object or event is no guarantee of truthful discernment." The same is true in my framework regarding all experience.

Let's take it a step further, while we're at it, and also make a correlation between my aspects of reality and the three models of interpreting *the nature of religious language* or Christian doctrine, as distinguished by George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984). I will draw on Wright's *Christianity and Critical Realism* here also. In his analysis, Wright correlates the *empirical domain* of reality with the *experiential-expressive* model of religious language, such as that of the Jesuit priest, philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan (Wright, 67–68). I also see a correlation between the experiential-expressivist model and what I call "life in our skin." Quoting Lindbeck, Wright explains that the "the *experiential-expressive* model 'interprets doctrines as noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations', so that Christian doctrines constitute linguistic expressions of an individual's pre-linguistic intuitive experience" (Wright, 67–68, citing Lindbeck, 16). I don't know that Lonergan would say his experiential model only has room for "intuitive experience." What about God's revelation and the objectivity of other sources that confirm that revelation? He surely takes those into account too. In any case, *life in our skin* (in my framework) also correlates with the "cognitive-propositional model" of religious language (another model identified by Lindbeck). That model "understands Christian doctrines as cognitively grounded 'informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities'" (Wright, 68, citing Lindbeck, 16). I see a correlation between my *life in our skin* and the *cognitive-propositional* model also because the latter corresponds to *all three dimensions* of reality in my framework: I certainly intend "cognitively grounded" truth claims about all three realms (the existential, the situational and the normative).

gender, self-transcendence, sense of others), and *human being* (agency, freedom and responsibility, behavior and motivations, vocation, reality construction), all of which will be covered in the curriculum.

Life on the Ground

Another aspect of things is our relationship to the rest of the world. Let's call it *life on the ground*.[9] This is one of the largest parts of the curriculum and it's quite comprehensive. It

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[9] This *situational* (and *interpersonal*) aspect of things correlates with critical realism's *real domain* (of the causal mechanisms underlying reality), but also with the *empirical domain* (of our personal experience), which I also correlated above to my existential domain or *life in our skin.* The *empirical* domain relates to the *situational* also because in this framework the self or individual remains included in the broader domains, which is also probably true in critical realism: "Personal experience in the empirical domain is inextricably linked with communal experience in the *actual domain* [of the sum total of existing objects and events in the world]" (Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism,* 69, emphasis mine). The *actual domain* just mentioned in the quote relates to the big picture dimension in my framework, *life in the world* (the normative and metaphysical). I'll explain that when we get there. But given Wright's association of "communal experience" with "the *actual domain"* above, tells me that he would associate my *life on the ground* (the situational) with the *actual* rather than the *real* domain. I'll have to dig a little deeper into the content of both to make sure, but given what I've seen so far it's probably going to be both. It's also possible that this exercise in correlating these frameworks will not in the end be necessary or useful, given the nature of their respective aims and configurations. We'll see. For now, let's just hear Wright's explanation of the *real domain*, which critical realism values as "ontologically basic" (p. 67), contrary to traditional scientific presuppositions about the *empirical domain* being ontologically basic: "The *real domain* is the sphere of the network of causal mechanisms that generate and sustain different configurations of objects and events in the actual domain, and make possible particular experiences in the empirical domain. … Access to the domain of the real is achieved not by expressing experience in the empirical domain, nor by producing surface descriptions of phenomena in the actual domain, but by generating and iteratively testing retroductive models of reality in the real domain. Such retroductive models seek to identify the causal mechanisms that actualise and configure objects and events in the actual domain and make possible experience of them in the empirical domain. Both idealised expressions of personal experience in the empirical domain and nominal surface descriptions of events in the actual domain fall short of retroductive causal explanation" (67–68).

Let's also correlate the *situational* in my framework with Lindbeck's models for religious language: it seems to correlate best with the *cognitive-propositional* model*,* which, as I explained above, actually relates to all three dimensions in my framework. By the way, Wright relates this model of religious language (the *cognitive-propositional*) and the *real domain* (of the causal mechanisms underlying reality), to "the critical realist commitment to retroductive explanatory modelling" (68). Just as the *cognitive-propositional* model is related to all three dimensions in my framework, so is *retroduction* (critical realism's preferred reasoning mode): "reasoning about why things happen including why the data appear the way they do" Wendy Olsen, "Critical Realist Explorations in Methodology," *Methodological Innovations Online* 2, no. 2 (August 1, 2007): 1, https://doi.org/10.4256/mio.2007.0007. Another helpful explanation of "retroduction" is in Christian Smith, *What Is a Person?* (p. 113): "retroduction—that is, identifying what has to be, whether visible or not, in order to account for what we have warranted reasons to believe really is."

explores how the universe works, the emergence and history of life on Earth, models of society and civic engagement, culture, and interpersonal relationships.

In keeping with our experiential approach, we'll engage this whole aspect of reality through the rubric of *freedom* and *responsibility*: the freedoms we humans have to pursue what we consider good and desirable, and the many responsibilities we share to protect and enable those freedoms in any given society.[10]

In this aspect of things, we ask questions like: *What can I expect of others? What do others expect of me? How are we doing? What do we want?* Similarly with nature. We have a lot of power over nature, but we also depend on it. So, what sort of relationship should we have with it? What can we expect of it, and what should it expect of us?

The Priority of Meaning

At the risk of getting too technical here, let's briefly address a question that might come up for some readers at this point: Why "freedom and responsibility"? Clearly, this isn't the only way to approach *life on the ground*. We don't have to talk about freedom and responsibility to talk about the stuff of life—much less about space, time and matter in all their particularities.

We'll approach it this way because it seems the most promising way to explore reality *from within,* learning about the stuff of life and how the world works in the most meaningful way possible. Freedom and responsibility are this meaningful and this promising because they help us frame our lives in relation to *the good*—in relation to the *ends* toward which we live. Few things are more meaningful than getting clarity on that.[11]

> *Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.* (Aristotle) [12]

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[10] For more on freedom and responsibility, see José Soto, "The Good Society," Wayfinders, June 12, 2021, https://www.wayfinders.quest/the-good-society.html.

[11] After the religious and political wars of sixteenth to eighteenth century Europe, societies started leaving behind ultimate conceptions of Truth and the Good as the ends toward which they aimed, since they saw in these strong beliefs the root cause of all that bloodshed. The good, from then on, was to be defined and pursued by the sovereign individual in the private sphere only. The role of government became simply to provide the contract and institutions within which individuals could freely peruse their own ends. See, for example, Ken Kersch, *American Political Thought: An Invitation* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2021), 227. But how's that working for us? Perhaps it is high time we start imagining other possibilities.

[12] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Andesite Press, 2015), p. 3 (1094a 1–2).

Now, we'll also engage in *theoretical* reasoning about matters of fact. But it's clear that theoretical reasoning leads to *beliefs* about the nature of things and how the world works.[13] Those same beliefs naturally inform our *practical* reasoning and our common sense, including the bigger questions of freedom and responsibility.[14] And because it is *meaning* we're after—not just isolated facts—we're going to subsume theoretical reasoning within practical reasoning, allowing us to zoom-in to assess data as usual, but always in service of the bigger picture and our place within it.[15]

The Big Picture
One way we'll keep an eye on the big picture is by framing this part of the project within a Big History framework: the story of the cosmos, from the Big Bang to the present.[16] Only we'll do it backwards: starting with life as we know it, and seeking answers to our questions by going back in time to see how we got here. Eventually this will lead to questions of origins (what came before the Big Bang, what caused it, etc.) which requires the next part of the curriculum, where

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[13] Wallace, R. Jay, "Practical Reason," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/practical-reason/.

[14] See, for example, Hilary Bok, *Freedom and Responsibility* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[15] See Iain McGilchrist on the need for more of this in the world: "The Divided Brain," RSA Animate, 2011, 11:47, https://www.ted.com/talks/iain_mcgilchrist_the_divided_brain. See also the work of Viktor Frankl, especially, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 4th ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, Rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2000); and *The Feeling of Meaninglessness: A Challenge to Psychotherapy and Philosophy*, ed. Alexander Batthyany (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2010). "Different academic disciplines seek to interrogate different strata of reality: broadly speaking, natural science interrogates nature, psychology interrogates sentient minds, and social science, the arts and the humanities interrogate culture. The basic principle of the hermeneutical circle requires parts to be understood in relation to wholes and wholes to be understood in relation to their constituent parts, in an ongoing dialectical process. … In a world of increasing academic specialisation, questions of the totality of reality tend to be occluded by questions about its constituent parts. In the history of Western thought, accounts of the totality of reality have traditionally been provided by the disciplines of metaphysics and theology. The positivist insistence that neither [of these two disciplines] provides meaningful knowledge by virtue of the unverifiable nature of their truth claims served to further occlude questions of the whole. The critically realistic assertion of the potential truth-bearing nature of both metaphysics and theology opens the door to a recovery of retroductive explanations that take the hermeneutical circle seriously." Andrew Wright, *Religious Education and Critical Realism*, 202–203.

[16] See, for example, David Christian et al., "The Big History Project," accessed May 29, 2021, https://www.bighistoryproject.com/. For a telling of Big History that takes into account subjectivity, including the emergence of religion and spirituality as in important development in evolutionary history, see John F. Haught, *The New Cosmic Story: Inside Our Awakening Universe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). I find the work of David Christian quite fascinating, but Haught's contribution makes Big History even more satisfying—both intellectually, and existentially.

we ask the big questions of meaning, faith, and God. We'll call that aspect of things *life in the world*.

Life in the World

This aspect of reality informs everything else we believe and do. If life is a Story, then what's the plot?[17] What's going on? And why are we here in the first place? Ultimately, it depends on where it all came from, on why there is something rather than nothing, and whether or not Someone made the cosmos, as some of our stories claim.[18]

One Reality

Our approach here is to recognize and assume that *reality is one,* in agreement with both science

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[17] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–88); David Wood, ed., *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1991), chap. 2: "Life in Quest of Narrative;" and Ted Turnau, *Popologetics: Popular Culture in Christian Perspective* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012), chap. 1, sec. titled "The Trunk: The World-Story." Kindle ed.

[18] As I already mentioned above, *life in the world—*the normative domain in this framework—corelates best with critical realism's *actual domain* of reality (the totality of all objects and events in the world). Wright explains that "our epistemic access to this domain is similarly restricted [as is the *empirical domain*], since we cannot possibly experience and fully comprehend the totality of actual objects and events in the world, past, present and future" (p. 67). I would also correlate this framework's *life in the world* with the *cultural-linguistic model* of religious language, Lindbeck's preferred model. However, I only go so far with Lindbeck's model. I think what I will end up embracing from Lindbeck (and the Yale School in general) is mostly the call to let the Bible "absorb the universe" (*The Nature of Doctrine,* p. 117): finding ourselves, and the rest of reality, in the narrative-world of the Bible. That's, of course, for those who are Christian. But I can already see that some of the ways in which theologians are using the philosophical and sociological insights Lindbeck is deploying are at odds with my reading of Scripture and my use of these insights. Proponents of "fictionalism," as some call it, believe that "religious concepts have meaning only in relation to the other concepts of the religion to which they belong and no meaning outside of that socio-linguistic system." Douglas V. Porpora, "A Propaedeutic to a Propaedeutic on Inter-Religious Dialogue," in *Transcendence: Critical Realism and God* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 111. I'm not sure about other religions (we'll investigate that later on), but this statement does not square with the claims of the biblical texts themselves. I do, however, appreciate the philosophical and sociological insights behind their approach, but I'm taking them in a different direction. The narrative-world of the Bible claims to describe reality and its ultimate meaning, and not just for those who inhabit its narrative-world, since it judges all other accounts of reality according to how they square with what the Creator himself has revealed about the nature of things. That is, the biblical story claims to be relevant to everyone and to all of creation, since it describes the origins and destiny of all things. Its concepts are thus relevant and explicable to unbelievers, and can also be meaningful to them, as long as the believers who explain them actually know what they're talking about. See also George A. Lindbeck, Dennis L. Okholm, and Timothy R. Phillips, eds., *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1996); and James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Relativism?: Community, Contingency, And Creaturehood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), chap. 5, "The (Inferential) Nature of Doctrine: Postliberalism as Christian Pragmatism."

and theology.[19] This means that whatever we believe about the ultimate order-of-things needs to square with our experience on the ground. That is, we should be able to *recognize* in our experience of life that which we have come to believe through other sources about the nature of things.[20] Let's unpack that a bit.[21]

Meaning and Ultimate Meaning

Because reality is one, we're able to build our worldviews both bottom-up and top-down. We draw our beliefs both from what we learn through our own experience (bottom-up), and from what we have received through other sources about the nature of things (top-down)—be that philosophical or religious traditions, family and culture in general, or the schools we went to. The question is how well those sources help explain our experience. To the degree that they do, they help us be at home in the universe.

This distinction between bottom-up and top-down sources also helps to differentiate *meaning* (sensemaking in an immediate context) from *ultimate* meaning (sensemaking in light of an ultimate context): meaning we can draw bottom-up—and, in fact, we *create* meaning ourselves

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[19] See, for example, Graham Priest, *One Being: An Investigation into the Unity of Reality and of Its Parts, Including the Singular Object Which Is Nothingness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), where he explains "what it means for all things to be one" (p. xvii). See also Andrew Wright, *Religious Education and Critical Realism,* 202: "Our best (currently) available retroductive account suggests that we participate in a single reality that is constituted by the totality of all that exists, once existed and potentially might exist. We experience and explain this reality as stratified, emergent, transfactual and causally efficacious. Though everything is interconnected in a thick web of causality, the fact that higher strata are irreducible to the lower strata from which they emerge requires us to recognise the existence of distinct-yet-related domains of being." All I mean though is that there's only one reality, however complex. A colleague once objected that this couldn't be because there may be many universes, not just one. I answered that if there are many universes, then *that* is reality. It remains one. As Andrew Wright explains: "To the best of our knowledge, everything in reality is ontologically related. If alternative realities other than our own exist then they must be ontologically related to our reality, even if that relationship is a negative relationship of absolute disconnectedness" (ibid., p. 214).

[20] I elaborate on this in *Reality According to the Scriptures,* ch. 1, sec. "The Lens of Our Experience."

[21] This is where we would engage the resources of worldview studies, asking worldview questions that help us put the narratives we inhabit on the ground (and also challenge and sharpen those narratives). But here we'll keep the focus broad in order to capture the whole. On worldview studies, see David Rousseau and Julie Billingham, "A Systematic Framework for Exploring Worldviews and Its Generalization as a Multi-Purpose Inquiry Framework," *Systems* 6, no. 3 (September 2018): 27, https://doi.org/10.3390/systems6030027. From a Christian perspective, see Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1984); and Ted Turnau, *Popologetics*, chap. 1, sec. titled "The Trunk: The World-Story." Kindle ed.

(that is the stuff of culture)[22]—while *ultimate* meaning we have to receive from others (parents, religion, philosophy), which always requires a measure of *trust*. As such, ultimate meaning is always received *by faith*.[23]

> Worldviews are ultimately based on fundamental faith commitments from which we understand evidence, truths, facts, and all of reality. Presuppositions are like a base camp for the mind: where you start out in your exploration of reality, and the place you come home to. Your set of presuppositions is the most basic place you know from. At this level, worldviews are fundamentally *religious*. That is, they are types of faith: they deal with life at the level of deepest commitment. (Ted Turnau)[24]

> Faith is the intuition that one is proceeding in the right direction. It is our conviction that the world is intelligible on our terms, and that truth is worth seeking. Faith is also trust in our own experience and powers of analysis. Even our capacity for reason requires that we have faith in its ability to arrive at the truth. (Bruce Sheiman)[25]

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[22] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor, 1967); and from a Christian perspective, see Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008).

[23] Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, 35: "Faith is an essential part of human life. Humans are confessing, believing and trusting creatures. And where we place our faith determines the world view which we will adopt… It shapes our vision for a way of life." See also Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams,* 31. Faith, she says, is "a matter of meaning." She explains: "We reserve the word *faith* for meaning-making in its most comprehensive dimensions. In other words, whenever we organize our sense of a particular object, a series of activities, or an institution, we are also compelled to compose our sense of its place in the whole of existence. Human beings seek to compose and dwell in some conviction of what is ultimately true, real, and dependable within that vast frame. Either unconsciously or self-consciously, individually or together, and taking more or less into account, we compose a sense of the ultimate character of reality and then we stake our lives on that 'reality'—the meaning we have made" (32).

[24] Turnau, *Popologetics*, chap. 1, under sub-section titled "The Roots: Presuppositions." Kindle ed.

[25] Bruce Sheiman, *An Atheist Defends Religion: Why Humanity Is Better Off with Religion Than Without It* (New York: Alpha, 2009), 190. See also Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 50th Anniversary Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Albert Einstein, "Physics and Reality," in *Ideas and Opinions*, trans. Sonja Bargmann (New York: Bonanza, 1954): "The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible" (p. 292); and Alister E. McGrath, *Surprised by Meaning: Science, Faith, and How We Make Sense of Things* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 56: "Both the scientist and the theologian … work by faith, a trust in the rational reliability of our understanding of experience."

This is so even in the most rudimentary aspects of knowledge: "we employ a basic hermeneutic of trust, not just in the external world but also in ourselves in-relation-to the external world" (Wright, *Religious Education and Critical Realism,* 43). Wright explains that "knowledge does not proceed from an artificial hermeneutic of suspicion, in which we deconstruct our antecedent knowledge and seek to reconstruct it on secure foundational principles. It is because our natural way-of-knowing takes precedence over artificial

Faith and God

Since ancient times, humans have believed that the world is not just physical but that there's a spiritual dimension to reality. Most have believed that there are spiritual forces or gods out there, and that they have a lot to do with what's going on in the world. Many have believed that there's only one God, and that he created all things. There are three major versions of that belief: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

If it is true that there are spiritual forces and gods out there, then who or what are they? And what do they want? And if it's true that there's only one God, creator of "the heavens and the earth," then who is he? And what are his intentions for the work of his hands? What can we expect of him, and what does he expect of us?

Today many find it difficult to believe there's any such thing as a spirit-realm, or gods, or a creator of all things. However, all the options available to answer questions of ultimate meaning have to be taken by faith. And that includes the possible existence of a spirit-realm as part of our ultimate context. But even if we're atheists, we still live by faith, because we have to trust our theories about why we're here, and such theories are philosophical in nature—certainly beyond the domain of science.[26]

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ways-of-knowing that we have a primal warrant to trust our illative sense and assent to our beliefs despite the absence of full understanding and demonstrable proof, and to continue to do so until such time as a more powerful account of our experiences and of the world we indwell becomes available to us" (43). This is how it works: "We refine our illative sense by immersing ourselves in communities of practice and learning from those whose illative sense is more advanced than ours. In specialist fields in which we have no expertise we have no option other than to trust the testimony of experts, and do so by applying our illative sense to the question of the veracity of the secondary testimony rather than the primary object of such testimony. Provided we have acted reasonably to refine our illative sense to the best of our ability, we have an epistemic warrant to hold fast to our beliefs, despite the absence of demonstrable proof. Thus the 'ordinary' atheist or religious believer is entirely justified in holding their epistemic beliefs with certitude, despite the ontological possibility that they may be mistaken, provided they have employed, to the best of their natural ability, judgemental rationality to iteratively test them in the light of their own experiences and the testimony of experts. This does not of course mean that atheists and theists are necessarily correct to hold the beliefs they do, since atheism and theism are ontologically incommensurate; it does however mean that they have a legitimate epistemic warrant to do so" (ibid., 44). This means that "the pursuit of knowledge … proceeds not by way of an artificial hermeneutic of suspicion grounded in an illusory rational objectivity, but by way of a cultivated hermeneutic of trust that proceeds from and through faith to deeper, faith-based understanding. Faith is not a subjective leap beyond objective reason to be tolerated provided it remains firmly within the private sphere; rather it is the necessary public basis of all knowledge, both religious and secular" (44).

[26] Regarding the limits of science, see for example, Marcelo Gleiser, *The Island of Knowledge: The Limits of Science and the Search for Meaning* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); and John F. Haught, *Is Nature Enough?: Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

The God of the Bible

And what about the God of the Bible? Isn't he said to show up from time to time and make himself visible, or otherwise reveal his existence through miracles and other supernatural phenomena (e.g., Gen 32:24–30; Exod 3:1–6; 1 Kings 18:20–39; Matt 1:23; Luke 1:1–4; John 20:30–31; Acts 5:12–16)?[27] Actually, the God of the Bible remains *a spirit* (John 4:24), even if he's said to have occasionally made himself visible. He's still not something or someone we can empirically account for, as we do with the natural world. And as atheist Bruce Sheiman explained above, even our understanding of the natural world requires a measure of trust; so it naturally takes another measure of trust (on top of that) to believe in spiritual realities.

It does take faith to believe in God then, just as it takes faith to believe anything about the ultimate order-of-things. All we can normally do is look for historical evidence regarding the claims of the Bible, and see if that narrative-world might actually square with our experience.

Conclusion

As we have seen, then, we all live by faith to some extent. It is optional to believe in God, but it isn't optional to believe *something* about the ultimate order-of-things.

This does not mean, however, that truth claims about God and the ultimate order-of-things cannot be subjected to rational investigation. Far from it. Just like all other knowledge, we judge our understanding of ultimate reality "in terms of the internal coherence of our truth claims and their external correspondence with reality" (Andrew Wright).[28] In other words, faith need not be *blind* faith. At its best, it is based on evidence. And on the reasonableness of what we've come to believe.[29]

Of course, we cannot approach metaphysical and spiritual realities as we do physical phenomena. Each field of inquiry needs its own methods and tools of investigation, according to the nature of its subject matter. But if reality is one, as we're assuming, and our traditions and theories do reflect reality, then we should be able to recognize the universe they describe in our own experience of life.

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[27] We'll look for historical evidence of all that later on in the project. Regarding the historicity of biblical events, see for example Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015); and N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019). On miracles, see for example Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011); and Craig S. Keener, *Miracles Today: The Supernatural Work of God in the Modern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021).

[28] Andrew Wright, *Religious Education and Critical Realism,* 112.

[29] This applies to biblical faith also. See especially Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).

In any case, these are crucial questions to ask. If we want to live intentionally and responsibly, making the best of life on the ground, we need to get at least some traction on this ultimate dimension of reality.

> Our ways of being in the world necessarily assume basic beliefs, whether implicit or explicit, about our place in the ultimate order-of-things. Actions guided by such beliefs are causally efficacious: they necessarily impact, for better or worse, on ourselves, other people, human culture and the natural world. The complex morphogenetic interplay of causal mechanisms across different domains of reality activated by such efficacious beliefs need not detain us here. It is sufficient simply to note that, for good or ill, beliefs generate change. This being the case, there would appear to be a moral, intellectual and spiritual imperative to strive to bring our beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality and the meaning of life, and the actions that follow from them, into conformity with the way things actually are via an ongoing pursuit of truth and truthful living. Or, should we prefer existential rebellion against the ultimate order-of-things—as in Ivan Karamazov's infamous decision to rebel against a God whose existence he does not question—to do so reasonably, responsibly and attentively. (Andrew Wright)[30]

In the end, though, there's actually no way around it. Wherever we come from, we all have to answer questions of ultimate meaning—whether explicitly or implicitly, intentionally or not. And how we answer them determines how we deal with questions of freedom and responsibility. And how we handle our freedoms and responsibilities determines how well we live our lives.

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[30] Andrew Wright, *Religious Education and Critical Realism,* 204.

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