

The God Who Is
Knowing God

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Introduction

Stanley Grenz has put together a robust systematic theology in his work *Theology for the Community of God*. In this, he sets out to define the faith for a new generation, specifically one that is lacking true community. With the American Church becoming more fragmented and divisive, Grenz seemingly has put together a work that looks to find common ground among the most classical Christian ideas.

In the first chapter of this book, Grenz puts forth the philosophical history of the Christian argument for God. The Early Church Fathers were influenced by the Greek thinkers around them. Platonism, Neoplatonism, and Aristotelianism can be seen in the works of Augustine, Origen, and Aquinas as they worked to describe the God they saw in Jesus. The Middle Age and Enlightenment saw advancements of science and reason that led other thinkers like Descartes and Kant to disagree over the nature of God. Is God the *a priori*? Can existence be an attribute?

Modernity has introduced a new set of challenges for theologians to face. In the light of the horrors of the two World Wars, the Stoic's view of suffering as accepting the things that cannot be changed seemed bleak. Is God unable, unwilling, or uninterested in helping Their people? Existentialism and Process Theology are able to find answers for these new challenges that face Christianity today. What seems like an exercise in theodicy still asks the same question - who is God to us?

How Do We Know God?

The ontological argument for God as given by Descartes works through his meditations to bring about doubt of everything we can know. Descartes brings his audience to the point of

doubting everything because we could be in a very realistic dream or manipulated by an evil demon. We cannot know anything, except that we are thinking. We know we are because of our ability to perceive ourself through our thoughts. Descartes starts to rebuild his knowledge on the ontological argument that God *must exist* because we can think of a God. If this God were to exist, They must exist to be the supremely perfect Being.

The ability to conceive of God as an idea, and logically conclude that the God of our thoughts must exist in order to be good, is a completely interior and retrospective way of knowing God. Even the prisoners in Plato's Cave could come to this conclusion because it follows a logical order. By naming our highest conceived entity "God", we are able to begin to construct a God.

Teleological arguments for God also provide a way to know God. The apparent order and direction of the world seemingly require a director. William Paley's Watchmaker example is widely known and used often in debates against atheists. The precision of the world around us is the evidence for a Creator - or at least a designer that put the motion in process.

Before Paley's Watchmaker, Thomas Aquinas began thinking of God as the first cause of all things. In his Cosmological argument, God is the first mover of a creation that is not a necessity. Because of God's firstness, God is also the highest good of all things and is Its own first cause. Both Paley and Aquinas show that God is understood through our experience around us. In these *a posteriori* proofs, knowing God comes from our experience with the external world.

These ways to know God can be sufficient to know that there is *a god*, but there is an assumption by these thinkers (or maybe by us as we read them in our own context) that this must mean the Christian God seen in Jesus. While there are both theistic and atheistic rebuttals to

these individual thinkers and positions, the root problem with these arguments is that they fall short of providing a rational model to prove the existence of the Christian God. Christian systematic theologians seek to put forth a unified vision of the Christian faith, but in order to do so, there are many assumptions that need to be made. The uniqueness of the Judeo-Christian God, the wholly good nature of this God, and the desire of this God to be in relationship with the creation, are all attributes we agree are part of God, yet are unable to be justified based on philosophical and moral arguments alone.

Why Don't We Know God?

Grenz spends much of his time in this first chapter (as well as throughout the book) on the ways we know God. Later on, he discusses the role of the Holy Spirit in revealing God to us. "Because of human depravity God is veiled to us, and we can do nothing to pierce that veil. God remains hidden unless and until he takes the initiative in disclosing himself to us."¹

This is a classic Christian argument - God is only distant to us because of our sin. When we are open and willing to accept God, through Jesus, we are then enlightened to Their presence in the world. How (and when) this happens is up for debate. Were we predestined to be open to God (or hardened by God like Pharaoh), or do we have freedom to choose for ourselves?

Kant uses the distinction of *noumena* and *phenomena* to reveal that God cannot actually be known because They are outside of our scope of perception. To continue that thought - if existentialism has credibility - then God cannot be known because *nothing* can be truly known. We know what we experience, but we are limited by our perception, and even our closest friends and family are still unknowable.

¹ Grenz, Stanley J.. *Theology for the Community of God*, Eerdmans, 2000. 378.

If we remove ourselves from the philosophical arguments, there is a moral argument that Grenz does not address. In a 2015 paper, Travis Dumsday argues that divine hiddenness is a moral choice God makes. In this, he argues that being hidden from the nonresistant unbelievers, God protects the resistant unbeliever by not revealing Himself before the resistant is ready.

“Having God’s reality forced upon them when they are in a state of resistance to God might result in significant spiritual/moral harm, inhibiting their ability to develop a positive relationship with God long-term. And if this is true, it could help explain why God refrains from revealing Himself in a rationally indubitable manner not only to the resistant, but even to the nonresistant. Why? Because it may be that under present circumstances God is actually more concerned about the welfare of the resistant than of the willing; and revealing Himself to all of the willing could actually result in the truth of theism being forced on the resistant.. In keeping with the Biblical model, God’s concern for the welfare of His lost people might outweigh his desire to commune openly with the willing.²

Reflection

Much of modern Christian thought addresses the rational ways we can prove that God exists. However, as I’ve demonstrated earlier, much of the proofs given, when taken most charitably, only assert deism. Even if we leave atheistic concerns to the side, the ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments for God are limited. We then are left to overlay our interpretation of God onto the framework of a Supreme Being or First Mover. I believe the moral argument is justly refuted through Kant and Russell and the way they delineate between morality and ethics.

Grenz puts forth a faithful systematic theology that, to his credit, gives a neutral voice to the critics of Christianity and Fundamentalist theology. He highlights Barth’s rejection of our ability to know God through our own devices and notes our inability to know God alone. “We do not approach God like we engage in the study of objects around us, namely, in an objective,

² Dumsday, Travis. “Divine hiddenness and the One sheep.” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 79, no. 1, 2015, 71.

scientific manner or at the whim of our own human will. Rather, we come to know God as God gives himself to be known. In the knowing process, therefore, the initiative comes from the divine side.”³

Grenz’s emphasis on the communal nature of Christianity is reflected in the way he argues we know the Christian God. Knowing God is initiated from God and we are known by God (Gal. 4:9). We then experience a collective knowledge of God through the community we participate in. I think this is the most truthful and faithful way to claim to know God. As Grenz notes, the Trinity models a relational and communal God that we see when we enter into community with each other.

A communal God that reveals Itself also allows those who are not ready to know God the ability to be in community until they are able to experience God. The concerns of Dumsday are tempered because God is not waiting for one to reach out to find Them, nor is God breaking through natural time and space to disrupt the lives of the unbelieving. The community is the filter of the relational God to the world.

³ Grenz, 69.

References

Dumsday, Travis. "Divine hiddenness and the One sheep." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 79, no. 1, 2015, pp. 69–86, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-015-9537-y>.

Grenz, Stanley J. *Theology for the Community of God*. W.B. Eerdmans, 2000.