

APPENDIX D

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE REAL:
THE ANCIENTS, THE BIBLE,
AND US

We moderns have a very different concept of ‘real’ from the one that has prevailed throughout most of history. In fact, we moderns do not have a particularly clear notion of what we mean by ‘real’. Our conception is quite vague and nondescript. We tend to understand ‘real’ to mean something like “having tangible existence.” Rocks, trees, animals, desks, chairs, and walls are indubitably real, for they are clearly tangible. Abstract things are harder for us to assess. On the one hand it would strike us as odd to say that love, justice, truth, and beauty are *not* real, yet it strikes us as equally odd to say that they are real. Certain concrete, tangible things incorporate beauty or truth or justice into their relationships to other tangible things. Those tangible things are real. But to say that the abstraction truth itself is real or that justice itself is real, that is a bit of a stretch for the typically modern person.

A very different conception of ‘real’ existed among the ancients. Their conception of real meant something more like “not being vulnerable to having its existence disappear.” If something was real, its existence was lasting and durable. If something was not real or less real, its existence was fleeting, ephemeral, and highly vulnerable.

Plato represents the ancients well in this regard. Plato believed that the desk chair I am sitting on is only barely real. Someone could take a hatchet and blow torch to my desk chair and transform it in a few minutes. It could be made into a pile of kindling and a bunch of scrap metal in no time. No longer would the desk chair exist. But the *idea* of the desk chair—that is, some person’s conception of what it had been—is not vulnerable to the hatchet and the blow torch. A craftsman could build me another desk chair just like the one that had been destroyed, for the idea or conception of what it had been continues to exist. (Even when every particular desk chair of like kind has been destroyed.) The only way to keep another desk chair completely out of existence would be to destroy every person who could grasp the conception of that desk chair and construct another one just like it. But even if we destroyed every human being, that would not destroy the idea or conception of a desk chair. For the idea would still exist as something to be grasped and understood by

some human being somewhere, if ever one were to exist again. There seems to be no possibility whatsoever of destroying the idea of a desk chair. Somehow, somewhere, eternally, it exists. It can never *not* exist. Accordingly, for Plato, the IDEA of a desk chair is exceedingly and especially REAL. The IDEA exists at the most supreme level of being REAL. But particular desk chairs that people sit on are considerably less real. Their vulnerability to being removed from actual existence is so great that they barely partake of REALITY at all, for what is truly real is what exists and cannot not exist. The truly REAL is what continues to exist eternally.

To be clear, these two conceptions of reality—the modern and the ancient—are very different notions. They share very little in common. Indeed, the only common element is that both of them view reality as defining a certain mode of existence. However, they define very different modes of existence as REAL. The modern notion defines the real as that which has tangibility and materiality. The ancient notion defines the real as that which has permanence and is not vulnerable to cessation of existence.

Four things are very striking about these contrasting conceptions of the real:

(i) The modern view tends to see reality as a digital concept. That is, something is either real or unreal. There are no degrees of reality. By way of contrast, the ancient view tends to see reality as an analog concept. That is, reality can exist in degrees. Neither view logically requires its respective notion. The modern view would not have to view reality as a digital concept; and the ancient view would not have to view reality as an analog concept. But this is how each conception of reality sees it. Consequently, ancients felt very comfortable speaking of one thing being more real than another. Moderns don't speak that way at all. Such speech confuses us. (What are you talking about? *More* real? How can something be *more* real? Either it has tangible existence or it doesn't. How can something have more tangible existence than something else?) But to the ancients, it made perfectly good sense to assess the degree to which something was real by the degree to which it was vulnerable to its existence ceasing.

(ii) To the ancients, it made perfectly good sense to recognize that some levels of reality were dependent upon higher levels of reality in a non-reciprocal kind of way. The desk chair I am sitting on could not exist at all if the universal idea of desk-chair-ness did not exist. But desk-chair-ness can exist whether there are any desk chairs in the world or not. Accordingly, my desk chair's existence is clearly dependent upon the existence of a higher order of reality—the realm of reality in which desk-chair-ness exists. But that higher order of reality is not at all dependent

upon the existence of this realm in which tangible desk chairs are sat upon. So, the ancients claimed, this realm we inhabit is *less* real than the higher order realm of reality upon which this inhabited realm depends for its very existence. The ancients were very comfortable with the notion that there are *levels of reality* existing in interdependent relationships to one another. We moderns do not think in these terms at all. Reality is reality. There are no levels of existence.

(iii) While the modern notion clearly tends to ascribe ultimate reality to the tangible and material, the ancient notion tends to ascribe ultimate reality to the intangible and the immaterial. To the modern, the visible, concrete, physical world has the primary claim to being real. To the ancient, the invisible, unseen, spiritual world of abstract ideas and intangible minds has the primary claim to being real.

(iv) Both of these respective conceptions of the real reflect a deeper philosophical worldview. These conceptions of the real are not universal notions rooted in common sense. They are notions that emerge out of a larger conception of what the cosmos is and where it comes from. The prevailing modern conception of the real is the direct result of the naturalistic materialist philosophy that prevails in the modern world. The ancient conception of the real is the direct result of their firm belief in a multi-storied cosmos where a spiritual reality (of one kind or another) is a higher realm upon which this realm we live in is dependent. With the modern rejection of any and all spiritual interpretations of the cosmos, a new conception of what is real had to take the place of the old. But universal human experience has not changed. What has changed is the prevailing philosophical worldview through which we interpret the world. Neither the modern nor the ancient conception of what is real has a greater claim on common sense than the other. Both follow from their respective philosophical theories of the cosmos.

How does the biblical perspective compare to these two conceptions of reality? All things considered, the biblical worldview is much closer to the ancient notion of reality than to the modern notion. That is not to say that the Bible reflects the ancient view in its entirety. The biblical worldview is not the Platonic worldview. Indeed, the early intrusion of Platonic thought into Christian thought steered Christianity away from a biblical worldview to a significant degree. There are serious differences between the Platonic worldview and the biblical worldview. And this is particularly true of their respective views of the REAL. Most notably, what is ultimately real for the Platonist is THE REAL—an eternal realm of ideas upon which all other existence depends. What is ultimately real for the biblical

authors is *The Creator God*—a personal, rational being. This is neither a trivial nor an inconsequential substitution. But it is outside the scope of our concerns here to explore these differences. Suffice it to say that the biblical worldview clearly is not the Platonic worldview, nor is it any of the other ancient worldviews. The biblical worldview is clearly and significantly distinctive among ancient philosophies, but it is much more akin to them than it is to the modern worldview. Certainly that is true with respect to the notion of what is real. Consider these three comparisons:

(i) The biblical notion of real, like all other ancient notions, is amenable to recognizing degrees of reality in a way that the modern notion is not. To speak of God as “more real” than we are is not, within a biblical framework, nonsensical. And the Bible freely speaks of the eternal plans and purposes of God as “more real” than the passing, ephemeral circumstances of our ordinary, everyday lives. Although John does not use the notion ‘real’ to make his point, John clearly wants to emphasize the superior reality of the person who chooses to do the will of God when he writes—“Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If any one loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever.” (I John 3:15-17, NASV) Notice that John’s fundamental argument hinges upon the ephemerality of the world and the eternity of the things of God. “In what should we invest our lives and existences?” John is asking. “In things that are passing away? Or in things that will endure forever?” The true child of God is the one who has discerned what is lasting and eternal—that is, what is truly and ultimately real—and has invested his life in those things, thereby securing the eternity of his own existence. He who invests his life in the things of this world will pass away along with the world itself, for the tangible, physical, material world that seems so real to us now is, in fact, truly temporary and fleeting. Only a fool would invest his existence in finding fulfillment in the fleeting.

(ii) The biblical worldview clearly understands different levels of reality. Clearly God exists on a whole different level of reality than do we and the world in which we live. We could look many different places in the Bible, but consider Psalm 102, “He has weakened my strength in the way; he has shortened my days. I say, ‘Of old You did establish the earth; and the heavens are the work of Your hands. Even they will perish, but You still endure; and all of them will wear out like a garment; like clothing You will change them, and they will be changed. But YOU are the same, and

Your years will not come to an end. The children of Your servants will continue, and their descendents will be established before You.” (Psalm 102:23-28, modified from the NASV) This Psalm gives explicit expression to the pervasive biblical notion that God is eternal, unchanging, and ultimate while all that he has created is utterly dependent upon him for its existence. When he chooses to, God will change the created order like a man changes his clothes. The created order is inferior in the nature of its being. It will “wear out.” The created order is the “work of God’s hands.” Had God not created, the creation would not exist. God, on the other hand, has always existed and always will. His existence is dependent on no one and no thing. God, the creator, clearly possesses a superior sort of reality to that possessed by the created order. God exists above and beyond this creation, on a higher level of reality. God is more real than we are. God is more real than anything else that exists. He is, as the medievals were inclined to put it, “THE MOST REAL BEING.”

The New Testament speaks of yet another sense in which there are levels of reality. Since God is more real than the created order, the purposes, promises, and plans of God are—by extension—more real than the circumstances of our lives here and now. Accordingly, the apostle Paul can write, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies (in the heavenly places) in Christ...” (Ephesians 1:3, modified from the NASV) The spiritual blessings that God has purposed to grant us exist in a realm that is more real than this realm. Whatever may seem to be real and appear to be true in our realm is nothing compared to what exists as real and true in the mind and purpose of The Most Real Being. Because of our discipleship to Jesus, the Messiah, there exist blessings *really* in store for us that are more real than any of the sorrows, difficulties, or obstacles of our lives here and now. In another letter, Paul writes, “If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.” (Colossians 3:1-4, NASV) When Paul exhorts them to set their minds on “the things above,” he is encouraging the Colossians to focus and concentrate on values that are more real and more ultimately true than those of ordinary earthly existence. Clearly the New Testament authors recognized that there were levels of reality in this sense. Some things were simply more permanent, more ultimate, and more substantial than others. The purposes, will, promises, and values of

God are clearly more real and more true than the changing circumstances of our lives and the values shaped by lives lived in the midst of ordinary circumstances. In this sense, therefore, there are levels of reality.

(iii) Clearly, in parallel to other ancient views, those things that the Bible holds to be ultimately real and ultimately true are invisible, intangible, immaterial, and spiritual realities, not the material, tangible realities of life here and now. On this point the biblical view is closer to the ancient than to the modern worldview.

Understanding the biblical conception of the real *vis à vis* the modern and ancient views is important. Contemporary Christians far too often adopt a modern notion of the REAL when they seek to understand the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. This is a critical mistake. The modern notion of the REAL is a concept completely foreign to, and in conflict with, the biblical notion of the REAL. It is a concept rooted in atheistic, naturalistic, materialist philosophy. It is not a commonsense notion that can be usefully employed to unpack the valid implications of the biblical worldview.

The existence of levels of reality is an assumption that is central to the claims advanced in this book. My whole argument hinges on the meaningfulness of thinking in terms of different levels of reality. The modern Christian, completely enculturated in a modern notion of what is REAL, will tend to dismiss as radical and bizarre the central tenet of my defense of divine determinism—namely, that God is more real than we are. But what may seem weird to the modern Christian would have seemed quite obvious and transparent to most Christians throughout history—indeed, to most peoples throughout history. What creates the sense of unfamiliarity that we experience as “weirdness” is our peculiarly parochial conception of the REAL rooted, as it is, in a decidedly recent philosophical worldview. God’s existence above us as more real than we are is not an offense to our common sense. It is an offense to the rather inadequate and distorted sense of the REAL that we have inherited from the modern godless culture in which we live.