

Introduction: Focusing the Question

The primary question of the philosophy of religion has been, “Is religious faith rational?” That question has usually been translated into a second question: “Are there good reasons to think that God exists?” Most philosophy of religion texts (and courses) focus their attention there, examining and evaluating the reasons pro and con for the existence of God. But it is important to notice that the first question leads to the second one only if we are willing to make various assumptions—about what religious faith is and what role theistic belief plays in it, about how religious language works, about how God is related to human life and experience, about whether “existence” is the correct way to talk about the reality of God, and so forth.

In this text, I wish to challenge all of those assumptions and consider some alternative ways of looking at faith, religious language, and the reality of God. Eventually, we will reexamine the question about the rationality of religious faith. But here, at the outset, we will begin with the question about the existence of God.

The Recurring Debate: Does God Exist?

Your studies up to this point will probably have acquainted you with a variety of theistic arguments, that is, arguments for or against the existence of God. These arguments have taken three basic forms over the centuries.

Cosmological arguments are arguments from the existence of the cosmos to its cause. Generally, such arguments take the following form: all events have causes; the universe (or its beginning) is an event; therefore, the universe must have a cause. The cause of the universe cannot be an event in the universe, so it must be a supernatural cause sufficient to create the universe. Such a cause cannot itself have a cause. It must be the uncaused cause, and

this must be God. There are variations on this argument. Thomas Aquinas generated three different versions on his own, all found in his *Summa contra Gentiles* (1264), which has influenced Christian thought on this topic ever since its publication.

Critics have noted that the argument seems to both assert and make an exception to its first premise. If every event has a cause, then what was the cause of God? Isn't it a bit odd that every event needs a causal explanation except God? Why make an exception in one case and not in another? If we're going to allow God to be self-caused, then why not allow the universe to be self-caused? A second line of criticism argues that causal language makes perfectly good sense when applied to events *in* the universe. We can meaningfully ask "What caused the Grand Canyon?" or even "What caused the solar system?" But when we apply the idea of causality to the entire universe, do we any longer understand the concept or the question or any answer we might give to it? Have we gone beyond the meaningful employment of the concept of cause?

Ontological arguments take the following form. Let us assume that anyone who understands the word *God* understands that it refers to an ultimately perfect being, a being who lacks no perfection. But any being who did not actually exist could not really be ultimately perfect, for we could then easily imagine a being that was more perfect, namely, one that actually existed. So, an ultimately perfect being must exist; otherwise, it would not be ultimately perfect, and that would be a self-contradiction. Two famous statements present this argument, one by Anselm of Canterbury in his *Proslogion* (1077) and the other by René Descartes in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641).

The most effective criticism against this argument was brought by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Kant argued that the ontological argument makes the assumption that existence is a perfection, that is, a quality that a most perfect being would not be lacking. Kant points out that existence is not a quality but a prerequisite of having actual qualities. We do not, when describing a thing, delineate all its qualities and then add, "Oh yes, and it also has the quality of existing." Existence, Kant maintains, is not a quality; hence, it is a mistake to think of it as a perfection. Consequently, it is a linguistic and logical mistake to argue that it is a perfection that a most perfect being would have.

The third general type of theistic argument is the *teleological argument*, or *argument from design*. There are more arguments of this type, and they vary widely. One by William Paley in his *Natural Theology* (1802) runs as follows:

Particular parts of the universe (as well as the universe itself) are extremely complex, intricate, and well adjusted to one another. The human eye, for example, is an amazing organ. Its design is exceptionally well adjusted to its function, at least as well adjusted as the design of a watch is to its function. The solar system itself operates according to physical laws that also bring to mind the intricate adjustment of parts found in a fine watch. If we were to find a watch while walking in the woods, we would naturally suppose that it had been made by a fine watchmaker and that it had been designed for the purposes to which it seems so finely suited. So it is also quite reasonable to suppose when we find intricate works and adjustments in nature that they have been designed and created with such purposes in mind. Such a designer and creator is, of course, a wise and powerful God.

There are many critical responses to this form of argument. First, there are parts of the universe that seem well designed and well adjusted, but there are also parts that seem chaotic and ill adjusted. Why is the human body, for instance, sometimes allergic to its own disease-fighting antibodies? Does that show careful design and workmanship? It's quite amazing that fish lay eggs and reproduce their kind, but is it also a sign of careful and wise design that only one in one thousand of these fish eggs survives into adulthood in order to reproduce itself? Second, we've seen watches being made and repaired, so when we find a watch, we very legitimately conclude that this new one has also been designed and made in the same way. But we've never seen a universe being made, so the analogy that the inference depends on is weakened by this important difference.

Third, as in the criticism of the cosmological argument discussed earlier, one may here also ask, "Do we understand what the terms '*creator*' and '*designer*' mean when applied at the level of the universe?" Probably the most effective criticisms of the design argument come from the work of David Hume and can be found in his book *Dialogues on Natural Religion* (1779). Finally, a more recent criticism came to light after the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). There, we are led to consider an alternative explanation of the adjustment of purpose and design of something like an eyeball. If the design of the eye did not serve well the life of the organism that possessed it, then that species would have died out. Thus, it should be no surprise that organisms that survive have eyes and other sense organs well suited to the lives they lead. Evolution, rather than a wise designer, provides an alternative explanation.

Arguments concerning the problem of evil are also generally included among theistic arguments. Although they take a variety of specific forms, they generally argue as follows. Assuming, as the ontological argument did, that God is a perfect being, then God would have the characteristics of being all powerful, all knowing, and completely beneficent, that is, willing only what is good for the creation. But if God has these characteristics, then why is there evil in the world? Given the perfection of God, evil is a problem.

There are a variety of responses to this problem. First, what seems like evil is always seen to be so from a limited point of view. The rabbit regards the presence of a fox family as evil, but from a larger, more ecological view, it is part of a larger design. The tidal wave that kills thousands of people seems evil to those affected but is actually a necessary part of the “best of all possible worlds.” Responses of this sort are usually called *theodicies*. One of the more famous of these arguments can be found in the work of the German mathematician and philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716). We might like to think that the world would be a better place without certain features (poverty, disease, natural disasters), but the removal of such features would result in a worse world overall.

A second response to the existence of human evil has generated what is frequently called “the free-will defense.” God could have made us morally perfect creatures, who would never do the horrible things we do to one another. But God could not have done so without taking our free will away from us. So we are allowed to pursue our own life choices (including evil ones) in order that free will may be preserved. One of the most famous of these arguments is by Alvin Plantinga in his *God and Other Minds* (1967).

All of these arguments can be, and usually are, examined in greater depth in any philosophy of religion text or course. Here, however, it is our purpose simply to be reminded of what they are and how they talk about God, God’s existence, and God’s relation to the world and human experience.

As shown by the dates noted in connection with these arguments and their criticisms, this dispute has been going on for a very long time. If we were to peruse contemporary philosophical journals, we would discover that they are still going on. There are contemporary philosophers who attempt to revive each of these three forms of argument and at least an equal number who sharpen new criticisms to be brought against them.

God versus Science: The Dawkins/Collins Debate

The November 3, 2008, edition of *Time* featured as its cover story “God vs. Science.” The accompanying articles included a debate between two scientists: Richard Dawkins, noted biologist, author of *The God Delusion*, who is one of the foremost anti-religious polemicists, and Francis Collins, also a biologist, director of the National Human Genome Institute, and a convert to Christianity. Here is a small slice of their conversation:

Time: [Question directed to Dr. Collins.] Both of your books suggest that if the universal constants, the six or more characteristics of our universe, had varied at all, it would have made life impossible. Dr. Collins, can you provide an example?

Collins: The gravitational constant, if it were off by one part in a hundred million million, then the expansion of the universe after the Big Bang would not have occurred in the fashion that was necessary for life to occur. When you look at that evidence it is very difficult to adopt the view that this was just chance. But if you are willing to consider the possibility of a designer, this becomes a rather plausible explanation for what is otherwise an exceedingly improbable event—namely, our existence.

Dawkins: People who believe in God conclude that there must have been a divine knob-twiddler who twiddled the knobs of these half-dozen constants to get them right. The problem is what this says, because something is vastly improbable we need a God to explain it. But that God himself would be even more improbable. Physicists have come up with other explanations. One is to say that these six constants are not free to vary. Some unified theory will eventually show that they are as locked in as the diameter and circumference of a circle. . . . The other way is the multiverse. That says that maybe the universe we are in is only one of a very large number of universes . . . as the number of universes climbs the odds mount that a tiny minority of universes will have the right fine-tuning.

Collins: . . . I actually find the argument of the existence of God who did the planning more compelling than the bubbling of all these multiverses. . . .

- Dawkins:** . . . What I can't understand is why you invoke improbability and yet you will not admit that you are shooting yourself in the foot by positing something just as improbable, magicking into existence the word God.
- Collins:** My God is not improbable to me. He has no need of a creation story for himself or to be fine-tuned by something else. God is the answer to all of these "How it must have come to be" questions.
- Dawkins:** I think that is the mother and father of all cop-outs. [pp. 5–6, online edition]

We should notice several things about this discussion. First, the debate is about the best explanation for the existence and state of the universe. It is about which, of the two views considered, is the best theory. That is the implication of the banner headline, "God vs. Science," as though these were rival answers to the same question, that question being, "What is the best explanation for the cosmos?" Collins maintains that God is that explanation, whereas Dawkins argues that the universe will ultimately explain itself and that no mention of God is necessary in such an account.

Second, the God whom they disagree about is a being, the grand creator and designer of the universe. The type of argument Collins is advancing is what has classically been called a design argument. The universe, he argues, shows evidence of careful design. Therefore, there must be a designer, and this designer everyone supposes to be God. If the narrator were to say, "It seems to me that both of you actually believe the same thing, namely that you neither know nor understand the ultimate cause of the universe? You simply disagree about what that great unknown should be called; one of you calls it God, the other calls it science," I'm sure both Collins and Dawkins would strongly object.

Third, the debate focuses on probability and improbability, though it frequently seems that Dawkins and Collins are not using these terms in exactly the same way. To ask about the probability of God is to ask something oddly different from asking the probability of a particular event or state of affairs. Or, do both of them believe that creation is or was an event? One thinks such an event happened, whereas the other does not? Neither seems to be bothered by talking about gauging the probability of this cosmos, or about gauging the probability of God. Both, it seems to me, have taken the language

of probability far beyond the point where we understand the questions or the answers.

Fourth, although both are famous biologists, neither seems able or even likely to change the other's mind. That makes one wonder whether their beliefs are based on their reasons or whether their reasoning is based on their beliefs. Another explanation might be that they are like two trains rushing toward each other but on different tracks. Just when we expect that they will crash, they pass by without actually encountering the other, and both emerge, ideologically, without a scratch.

Finally, some interesting questions could arise in such a discussion. Perhaps they did, and the *Time* editors left them out. In any case, their exclusion is itself significant. Is the language of physics sufficient for describing the whole of reality? Is theistic language necessary and appropriate in order to give a scientific (i.e., causal) account of cosmogony? I would answer no to both of these questions. Is this what a discussion about the rationality of religious faith should be about? Once again, I'd answer no. The fact that these questions are not even raised shows much about the assumptions with which both Dawkins and Collins are working. When two disputants share common assumptions, it can be fruitful to articulate those assumptions and question them. Yet, there are assumptions here that neither seems willing to recognize or to question.

“Does God Exist?” Was There a Time when the Question Did Not Arise?

If we read through the extant documents of ancient and classical civilizations, we will find a great deal of religious literature. The poetry of the ancient Greeks, for example, is full of references to the gods and their interactions with one another and with humans. Hymns, myths, architecture, and sculpture are dedicated to, or depict, these gods. But in spite of all these references, there is little questioning about whether these divine beings exist.

It seems to have occurred to no one in the Hellenic world to climb Mount Olympus to see if the Olympian gods really resided there or to check out whether Persephone made her annual spring trip back to be with her mother, Demeter, and her annual autumn trip back to the domain of her husband, underground in the realm of the dead. Perhaps these myths were told and heard with a strand of irony that made the hearers understand how they

should and should not be taken. We hear that Socrates was accused of atheism, but his accusers seem to have confused atheism with simply not believing in the right gods, the gods of the Athenian community. No critical reader can take such a charge seriously. Besides, the accompanying charge was that Socrates was inventing new gods, so it hardly sounds like atheism in the sense in which we use the term today.

Why, in this early age of first science and philosophy, was there so little discussion about the existence of the gods? The only piece in the ancient literature that looks like an argument for the existence of the gods was offered by stand-up comic and philosopher Diogenes the Cynic (412–323 BCE). He remarked that there must be gods, for how else could one explain the stupid behavior of one of his contemporaries, Lysis, whose wits seemed to have been blasted by them.

One major exception to the general silence on the topic is the philosophy of Aristotle (384–322 BCE). Aristotle constructed an argument in his *Metaphysics*: an account of the universe is not complete without a nonredundant account of its cause. The ultimate cause of the cosmos cannot be a never-ending series of causes because then the question is not answered, only indefinitely postponed. There must be, therefore, a self-caused cause of everything else. This must itself be a continuing process that lacks nothing. Aristotle concludes that this must be God thinking about God's own perfect nature. The perfection of God is thus the ultimate final cause of all other processes in the universe. It's interesting to note that Aristotle does not identify this divine process with any particular god of the Hellenic world or of any other religion. Nor does Aristotle conclude that any particular worship of this God is appropriate. In some ways, the activities of every organism and mechanism in the cosmos are motivated or inspired by the perfection of this uncaused cause.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is heard, obeyed and disobeyed, praised, accused, questioned, lamented, challenged, and addressed in prayer and hymn. But God's existence, at least, does not seem to come up as an issue. Why wasn't this a pressing question or the focus of lively debate? Why is it not a question that focuses attention in the Greek and Hebrew Scriptures or the Christian Gospels, the Epistles of Paul, or the Qur'an?

Was it because these people of time past were too pious or too obedient or too uncritical or too stupid to doubt the existence of the divinities they worshiped? I don't think so. Certainly, among the writers of the ancient world are some of the most critical, reflective, and inventive minds in human history.

Why, then, weren't they questioning the existence of God or the gods? Let me suggest two explanations.

First, God or the gods were the focus of worship, not objects of thought. *Which* god or gods one worshiped was an interesting and viable question, a question of some concern and interest, but it occurred to almost no one to question whether there were even gods to be worshiped. Imagine a conversation with a friend about what each of you values most highly. An interesting discussion might well follow. But imagine a third person walking in and questioning whether there *is anything* to value, that is, whether values exist. The question strikes us as wrongheaded. The very fact that we value things is all the evidence one could want that there are such values. The question "Yes, but do values exist?" seems weird beyond belief. I think the question "Do the gods exist?" was weird in exactly this way to ancient peoples and people of the classical past.

Nicholas Lash (2004) explains it this way:

For most of our history, then, 'gods' were what people worshiped. I do not mean that people worshiped things called 'gods'; I mean that the word 'god' simply signified whatever it is that someone worships. In other words, the word 'god' worked rather like the way 'treasure' still does. . . . there is no class of objects known as 'treasures'. There is no going into a supermarket and asking for six bananas, a loaf of bread, two packets of soap and three treasures. Valuing is a *relationship*. Treasures are what we value.

. . . There is no class of objects known as 'gods.' Worshiping is a *relationship*; gods are what we worship. [10]

Worshiping, in other words, helps establish the meaning of the idea of God. It proceeds that way rather than first establishing whether God or the gods exist and then deciding whether or not to worship this God. We begin to understand what God-language means by noticing what worship is.

This brings us to the second possible explanation of why the question about the existence of God or the gods did not arise in those earlier times. Religious language (prayers, hymns, sacred stories, dramatic enactments) was understood in its life-orienting role rather than as a set of assertions about some supernatural realities. The implication of this explanation is that religious language was assumed to be not primarily descriptive or fact assertive but life orienting. We read about Moses' encounter on Mt. Sinai not primarily

to tell us something about Mt. Sinai or about Moses but to tell us something about the life and worship focus of this covenant community. In a parallel way, my saying “I love you” to my beloved is not a *description* of how I feel nor about how much love is contained in my love glands (glandular secretions can, after all, be measured) but is about my intention for the orientation of my life in the present and the future. It *looks* grammatically like a description, but it *works* much more like a promise. In asking, “Do you love me?” the beloved is looking for a commitment, not for a description. So the grammar of some religious language may look descriptive, but it functions as a language of orientation and commitment.

Before it can occur to people to begin questioning the existence of God or the gods, both of these explanations must change. God or the gods must come to be thought of as beings, asserted by the believer and denied by the unbeliever, whose existence may be questioned and defended. The existence of God was not a pressing issue in the ancient or classical world because people had not fallen into thinking this way. But it is the way many people (lots of philosophers among them) think today. We commonly assume that *faith* equals *believing* and that the primary belief is belief in the existence of some entity called God. If one begins with such assumptions, then, quite naturally, the next question will be whether there is such an entity. If one does not make these assumptions, on the other hand, the question will seem oddly wrong-headed and unnecessary.

It is the thesis of this book that accepting these assumptions and adopting this way of thinking was not an advance but a very deep conceptual mistake, a mistake about language and a mistake about the nature of faith. If I am right about that, it is a mistake that has had dire consequences for both philosophy and religion. It continues to confuse many people, both religious and nonreligious.

Mythos and Logos

For a very long time, historians of thought have treated myth as though it were a kind of pre-rational theory. Before people learned how to offer theories based on evidence and reason, the common account ran, they offered myths. We, living in a postmythological age, see the inadequacy of myth as a theoretical explanation and therefore see philosophy and science as necessary and more successful attempts at the same thing. We read myth as though

it were primitive theory, and we evaluate it on theoretical grounds. Myth is thus dismissed as weakly supported theory. That seems to be what Dawkins's dismissal of religion is based on. But what if myth is not, and never was, an attempt at theory? What if it is something quite different, functioning in a different way in the lives of humans? To fault myth for not being very good theory is like faulting a dancer for not being a very good football player. The appropriate response is not to defend against such charges but to point out, "Dance is not poorly executed football; it's not football at all. Something completely different is going on there."

Myth is more than a story about some past event or state of affairs. Myth is simultaneously about the past (grammatically) and about the present and the future (intentionally). It is essentially connected to ritual and to the complexities of human life. Myth is a life-orienting telling and doing. C. Stephen Evans, in his 1996 book *Why Believe?*, comments that "religious beliefs are not primarily intellectual *theories*, about which we can easily suspend judgment. *Religious convictions concern life and how it should be lived*" (8). And Karen Armstrong, in her best-selling book *The Case for God* (2009), writes:

Myth and ritual were [from the beginnings of human culture] inseparable, so much so that it is often a matter of scholarly debate which came first: the mythical story or the rites attached to it. Without ritual, myths made no sense and would remain as opaque as a musical score, which is impenetrable to most of us until interpreted instrumentally.

Religion, therefore, was not primarily something that people thought but something they did. Its truth was acquired by practical action. [xii]

As a consequence of this, the adequacy of a religion cannot be evaluated by an armchair theorist who regards its documents as so many theoretical propositions. It can be adequately judged only by one who has participated in the myth, ritual, and the life form that it shapes. To anyone else, it will seem incredible and fantastic. And it will be quite misunderstood. Religion is a practical endeavor, life shaping and life changing. That's why it has to be so much more than believing the right dogma or assenting to the right propositional belief.

Armstrong goes on to trace both the source and the consequence of this misunderstanding. She writes:

The rationalized interpretation of religion has resulted in two distinctively modern phenomena: fundamentalism and atheism. . . . Atheism is parasitically dependent on the form of theism it wishes to eliminate and becomes its reverse mirror image. . . .

I am concerned that many people are confused about the nature of religious truth, a perplexity exacerbated by the contentious nature of so much religious discussion at the moment. My aim . . . is simply to bring something fresh to the table. [xvi, xvii]

That is also one of the purposes of this book.

That the question of the existence of God or the gods seldom arose in ancient civilizations is not all by itself a reason we should not raise the question.

There are also several other reasons, many of which are presented in the sections that follow. Together, I believe they make a strong case.

Questioning the Questions

Many people (including most thinkers who argue about the existence of God) suppose that religious faith and the God-language it generates addresses such questions as “What caused the universe?” and “What happens to us after we die?” Such a beginning rests on the assumption that religion will answer for us questions that are at the edges, beyond our experience and our normal powers of knowing.

I would suggest instead, echoing the twentieth-century Christian thinkers Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas Merton, that religion answers questions that are at the very center, questions such as “What does it mean to be human?” and “How are we in the world?” and “How are we with others?” The first set of questions sees God as transcendently high, transcendently long ago, or transcendently into the future. The second set see, God as transcendently deep and, odd as this may sound, transcendently present. The former questions are, I think, ones that can be avoided, or at least we can avoid answering them by simply saying that we do not know enough to answer them. The latter questions are ones that all humans answer in one way or another by the way we live our lives.

If the role of philosophy of religion is to evaluate how well religious faith responds to its foundational questions, then getting those questions right is crucial. We will return to this issue in chapter 5, which asks, “Is religious

faith rational?” Should it be a fair evaluation of religious faith to discover that it does not produce a convincing cosmology or an evidence-responsive biology? I would say, “No.” Is it, on the other hand, fair to critique religious faith because it does not provide an adequate or workable life focus? I would say it is.

It is extremely important to see that even our opening questions make assumptions and that these assumptions are often what most need to be questioned. But that is exactly what philosophy is—the uncovering and questioning of really basic assumptions.

FROM THE CLASSROOM: STUDENT QUESTIONS & RESPONSES

Q. When I first encountered Anselm’s version of the ontological argument, I was very confused by it. But now I think it makes very good sense. I paraphrase it this way: “A God that doesn’t exist is no God at all.”

R. That’s a very provocative way of putting it. But I don’t think it works very well as an argument. Suppose we imagined a wonderful cure for cancer; it’s readily available, it does not require surgery or other invasive therapies, and it doesn’t seem to have any negative side effects. How happy we’d all be to hear news of such a thing. Then someone asks, “It sounds wonderful, but is there such a thing?” At that point you respond, “It must exist, because a cancer cure that doesn’t exist is no cure at all.” We may agree with that sentiment, but I doubt we’d be convinced on those grounds that such a cure is actually available.

Q. Dawkins and Collins seem to be arguing about whether God is a good and necessary scientific theory. Why won’t Dawkins allow God as simply an alternative scientific answer? Scientists, after all, seem willing to consider more than one theory.

R. If you’re interested in Dawkins’s view, I suggest reading him in more detail. He has a lot to say about this issue. But for now, let me just suggest this line of argument: if something is going to count as a viable theory in science, then it has to meet the criteria of a good scientific theory; it has to be based on evidence, it has to be verifiable or falsifiable, and so forth. Dawkins doesn’t think that God meets those criteria.

Q • Isn't it likely that people didn't question the existence of gods because they were afraid to? Socrates was, after all, put to death even if the charges were not coherent.

R • I'm sure that was true of many people in the ancient world, just as it may be true of some people today. But, curiously, Socrates was willing to do other things that ended up getting him in trouble. Yet, he seems to take at least some of the Hellenic divinities very seriously. I don't think he was doing that because he was afraid of the authorities. I think he didn't question their existence because it was not an issue that particularly interested him or made sense to him.

Q • Is it Armstrong's point that both theism and atheism are a mistake? Does that make her an agnostic?

R • No. I believe she would say that all three of these alternatives are modern phenomena and part of what she calls "the rationalized interpretation of religion." Theists believe that God exists, atheists believe that God does not exist, and agnostics think that there are not sufficient reasons to draw either conclusion. All three positions assume, however, that "Does God exist?" is the right question. Armstrong wants to challenge that assumption, and, as you'll find in the next chapter, I do as well.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1** • Are there other kinds of arguments for the existence of God than the three types mentioned?
- 2** • Is the Dawkins/Collins debate typical of contemporary arguments about religion? Do you know of others who approach the issue differently?
- 3** • Can you think of alternative explanations for the relative lack of attention given to the issue of the existence of God or gods in the ancient world?

4 • What difference does it make to discover that myth and ritual are inextricably linked? How does that change our reading of myth? How does it change our participation in ritual?

5 • Armstrong's music analogy suggests that myth is to be "read" like a musical score is read—as a set of instructions for performance rather than as a source of information about another world. Can you think of significant differences between reading music and reading a myth? What worlds are each related to and how?

6 • The quotes from Evans and Armstrong support the idea that we do not need to establish the existence of God before worship makes sense. In fact, we may learn the meaning of God-language only in the midst of worship and the life it helps shape. Can you think of other situations where that is the case—that is, where we learn the meaning of an idea by participating in a form of life?