

Synopsis of *Saving God: Religion After Idolatry* by Mark Johnston

Preface

Not really a work of philosophy or theology: “simply an expression of a certain sensibility.”

“One kind of ideal reader would be an intelligent young person who is religious, but who feels that his or her genuine religious impulses are being strangled by what he or she is being asked to believe, on less than convincing authority, about the nature of reality.”

1 Is Your God Really God?

Believing in God

Belief: not acceptance of a proposition but standing in a certain relationship.

“Saving God is saving God from us, from our lazy and self-satisfied conviction that our conventional patterns of belief and worship could themselves capture God.”

Subjective criterion (e.g., sincerity) is not enough; belief in a god vs. belief in God.

“No amount of inspecting your own psychological state can itself determine whether you believe in God, as opposed to a god.”

Asserting identity of “God” in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (“syncretistic confusion”) is based on wishful thinking as well as anxiety in face of discomfiting questions.

On the “Names” of God

“God” is no ordinary proper name (where the reference is determinate and specific descriptive content may be in error), but rather a title or honorific description (including the possibility of error about the referent).

If “God” means “The Highest One,” belief in God is an achievement: one must “hit the mark.”

“There is no chance of believing in God, unless God has disclosed himself to us. The achievement of believing in God can come about only in the wake of God’s self-revelation.”

“It remains a live possibility that no object of conventional worship is, as yet, God. That is why belief in God may be a much rarer thing than has been almost universally supposed.”

One can hope that one’s belief in God “hits the mark” — this book is “an exploration of how things look when that hope seeks understanding.”

The Meaning of “God” and the Common Conception of God

Henotheism (highest god among many) is on the path from polytheism to monotheism.

God as “Most Perfect Being” does not include the idea of “salvation” that is part of the common conception of God in the three monotheisms.

“That God is our salvation is monotheism’s shocking and very substantial claim, which is to say that it does not follow from the meaning of ‘God,’ the title or descriptive name whose meaning is best understood as given by a description like ‘the Highest One.’ ”

Suspend question of God’s existence for now to investigate idea of salvation.

What is Salvation?

We need a “neutral account of salvation” that is (1) is not biased towards one of the three monotheisms, (2) is comprehensible to unbelievers, and (3) allows for salvation without reference to God (e.g., Buddhism).

Salvation vs. Spiritual Materialism

Large-scale structural defects of human life (LSSDHL) include suffering, corrosive aging, existential ignorance, isolation, corruptibility of what we cherish, untimely death.

Ordinary virtues (self-confidence, flexibility, openness, perseverance, good judgment, etc.) allow only for coping; the theological virtues (love, faith, hope) are conditions for transformed or redeemed life in face of LSSDHL.

Spiritual materialism is religious fraudulence, ineffective in dealing with LSSDHL.

“The spiritual materialist . . . simply turns his ordinary unredeemed desires toward some supposedly spiritual realm. However intense his experiences, they do not deepen in him the theological virtues that constitute the change in orientation that makes for a new life.”

2 The Idolatrous Religions

The Ban on Idolatry

Even religions display “collective resistance to True Divinity” — idolatry is an attempt to “domesticate the experience of Divinity”

“To the extent that the actually existing religions embody one or another version of this kind of compromise, they are idolatrous.”

“To comprehend one’s own religion . . . involves bringing into clear view the religion’s characteristic way of resisting the Divine: its way of redeploing its supposed foundational experiences of Divinity in the service of a reinvented worldliness”

Example: I Cor. 13: the “immanent and heroic form of first-century Christian life” (speaking in tongues, faith to move mountains, martyrdom, etc.) is nothing, says Paul, without *agapē*.

Idolatry as Perverse Worship

Biblical commandments against idolatry target worship of anything but the Highest One.

Graven Images and the Highest One

Perversity of idolatry is worshiping an embodiment of the deity in a form that is under human control (“domesticated”), thereby preserving self-involvement and willfulness.

“Idolatry is, then, invariably the attempt to evade or ignore the demanding core of true religion: radical self-abandonment to the Divine as manifested in the turn toward others and toward objective reality.”

Idolatry as Servility

Idolators are slaves to their gods (out of fear or out of lust for advantage).

“To organize one’s life around these motives . . . is to reinforce in oneself the psychology of generalized moral duplicity. One will take a different attitude to the powerful and to the lowly, depending on the respective capacity of such persons to confer advantage. This is a reliable sign of being base.”

Worshippers of the Highest One yield to their truest nature.

The Rhetoric of Idolatrousness

The major religions often attribute idolatry to others’ worship.

Less commonly, inauthentic worship is noticed within one’s own religion (example: Tillich on “holy objects”).

The Same God?

It is hard to see how the gods of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in actual doctrine and worship, can be construed as “the same God.”

The Pharisees’ Problem with Jesus

The Pharisees could not help but view Jesus’s claims as idolatrous (in John 8:58)

Could We Be Idolaters?

That is, given that the major monotheistic religions define themselves as founded upon revelation, how can their authenticity be established?

Proceeding phenomenologically (i.e., suspending crucial questions): if the founding revelation were veridical, would it be a revelation of the Highest One?

This requires an “antecedent knowledge of the Highest One” (i.e., not based on revelation), which is hardly anything but negative knowledge derived from a “religious sense” (a sense that, like “musical sense,” not everyone shares).

3 Supernaturalism and Scientism

Scientism and Superstition

Purging religions of idolatry would preempt much of the criticism from “undergraduate atheism” (e.g., Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris), which confuses religion in general with idolatrous and supernaturalist forms of religion.

They “uncritically share a defective premise with their secret fundamentalist allies, namely, that religion is essentially supernaturalist.”

“[They] build superstition and supernaturalism into the very meaning of ‘religion,’ and so by mere semantic artifice occlude the very possibility of religion without idolatry, the only good candidate to be real religion.”

Task: to explore whether religion purged of idolatry can be consistent with “legitimate naturalism.”

“The idolatrous religions degrade their putative experience of Divinity by entirely wedding it to the passing and adventitious worldviews of their founding fathers. So the hard work of re-expressing the experience of Divinity within a plausible worldview does not get done, because elements of the outdated worldview have come to provide crucial secondary compensations for those who would use their religion as a venue for spiritual materialism.”

Supernaturalism

Supernaturalism: belief in invisible agencies whose interventions violate the laws on nature, where “laws of nature” reflects state of scientific understanding of how nature works.

It is anachronistic to apply current science to ancient worldviews (e.g., Mark’s gospel). A question is whether the salvific ideas of, e.g., Mark can find authentic expression in a framework with a better understanding of reality?

It may be that Mark’s message can be decoupled from his worldview (i.e., no essential supernaturalism); but, it seems, otherwise for Paul’s.

“[At some level] there is no essential tie between the salvific message of Mark’s Gospel . . . and the confusions about the natural world shared by Mark and his contemporaries.”

Legitimate Naturalism

Legitimate naturalism is based on proper respect for methods and achievements of science.

Science is a complex, open-ended collection of ways of finding out about the world

Religion is a complex, open-ended collection of cultic practices from which the practitioners derive “existential strength” — i.e., a deepened capacity to deal with LSSDLH.

There is no generic conflict between science and religion:

“The very idea of a refutation of religion by science is thus a misplaced generality. It would have to involve the singular scientific result that there is no authentic source of existential strength. Which subfields of science are working on that question, and with what methods?”

There are many religious viewpoints that insist on harmonizing science and religion. The conflicts appear only when obsolete world pictures are insisted upon.

Scientism versus Science

Scientism is the application of a scientific world picture that forgets the abstractive preconditions of scientific modeling (its “methodological naïveté”); consequences include (1) viewing intelligibility as subjective and (2) failing to account for the objectivity of reason and of epistemic norms (i.e., the fundamental preconditions of the sciences themselves)

Science, aspiring to causal completeness in its modeling of reality, can help divest religion of superstition (divination, occultism, and other forms of spiritual materialism)

Methodological naturalism: “Nomological character of causation” provides a causally complete model of reality.

Ontological naturalism: basic physical laws describe ultimate material constituents; causal mechanism leading to life, consciousness, choice, etc., will be in accord with laws of nature; the Highest Being need not be absent from the natural world (nor be relegated to role of “watchmaker”): system of natural law may be a manifestation of the Highest One; emergence of rational and loving beings may receive naturalistic explanation.

The Argument for Naturalism From True Religion

Methodological naturalism does not necessarily entail ontological naturalism. Arguing for ontological naturalism based on “success” of science is weakened by appearance of “survivorship bias.”

Religious argument is that we should hope that ontological naturalism is true: the latter is a defense against supernaturalism, which tends to promote servility and inauthenticity.

4 The Phenomenological Approach

The Method and the Question

Method: take the foundational experiences of monotheisms on their own terms and try to infer character of spiritual beings presented.

Question: is the character of the Highest One displayed in those experiences?

This approach is not just about external critique; example: practice of “discernment of spirits” within Christian traditions.

Yahweh’s Use of the Method

Another example: Psalm 82 (demotion of *elohim*).

A Criterion, or an Enclosed Circle?

Is there a discernible criterion based on an antecedent religious sense? Or is Yahweh’s judgment upon the *elohim* opaque (closed circle of authority)?

Yahweh’s Criterion Applied to Himself

Many examples of Yahweh the ferociously jealous god (vengeful, murderous, even genocidal).

“At best, this appears to be an idolatrous projection onto the Highest One of the insecurities associated with the patriarchal psychological structure of ancient Near East tribal life.”

“Try to play down [the theme of Yahweh’s violence] and you will underestimate the dramatic character of Yahweh’s transformation, his second life as the advocate of justice and compassion.”

Marcion (2nd century CE): Yahweh may be Creator of this world, but not its Redeemer.

Rabbinic Judaism: attempt to amplify theme of justice and love.

Forgiving the God

Jeremiah (in Lamentations 3): in spite of sufferings endured, he persists in his love and faithfulness toward the Lord.

A Reply to Yahweh’s Answer to Job

The experience of the strange/tremendous/mysterious to which a theological construction is added falls short of a revelation of the Highest One: the content must be internal to the experience.

Logically, an antecedent concept or “sense” of the Highest One must have been brought to the foundational experience of the Highest One.

The logic of “seeing and hearing *as*” makes some antecedent religious sense a precondition of the revelation of the Highest One.

5 Is There an Internal Criterion of Religious Falsehood?

The Pope's Criterion of Religious Falsehood

Various quotations from Pope Benedict, whose (notorious) Regensburg lecture deploys a criterion for recognizing religious falsehood, namely, Reason (Logos).

He affirms an “inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry” — Logos as publicly accessible reason understood as an objective constraint on all actual reasoning and communication.

Benedict: “From the very heart of Christian faith and, at the same time, the heart of Greek thought, [15th century Byzantine emperor] Manuel II was able to say: Not to act ‘with logos’ is contrary to God’s nature.”

Benedict criticizes Reformation leaders for dehellenizing Christian teaching (principle of *sola scriptura*) and Kant for dichotomizing thinking and faith.

“These are extraordinary propositions, which taken together go far beyond the traditional Catholic legacy of the mere harmony of revelation and natural reason. For Benedict is saying that the deliverances of reason are an ineliminable part of the full revelation itself. Indeed, [they] have a kind of veto power over other purported Judeo-Christian revelations”

A Consequence of the Pope's Criterion

“God cannot do anything contrary to reason” — what is meant is not purely formal reason but substantive reasonableness (naturally knowable propositions).

Religious and Scientific Fallibilism

Availability of a criterion of religious falsehood leads to possibility of religious fallibilism (i.e., accepting that the religion may be incomplete or contain falsity) → genuine ecumenicism?

Fallibilism in science: progress in (open-ended, self-critical) science depends on falsification, i.e., observations that contradict proposed theory. But scientists must be able to distinguish anomalies from genuine counter-examples: science requires a common acquired discernment.

“Here, as elsewhere, substantive reasonableness, and not mere compliance with the canons of formal rationality, is a necessary condition for any collective deepening of understanding. And we have to be trained into traditions of substantive reasonableness.”

We can find traditions of substantive reasonableness in the three monotheisms (*via analogia*).

6 Why God?

Doesn't Substantive Reasonableness Suffice?

If substantive reasonableness can become available (e.g., as a criterion for religious falsehood), why isn't it also sufficient for making ethical judgments? Why bring “God” into ethics?

Because “we are, in a certain way, fallen creatures” in need of “grace” that can overcome the centripetal force of the self and turn us toward the ethical.

“The only think that can set us right is a *katalepsis*, a seizure by grace, something transformational entering from outside our fallen natures.”

The Fall

The biblical story indicates that there is something deeply problematic about being human.

1. Eve's disobedience (self-will) has roots in very structure of consciousness: center of an arena of presence and action ("here" vs. "there": "massive asymmetry" between the former, which is prized and protected, and the latter, which presents obstacles or opportunities), leading to preverbal distinction between "self" and "not-self" and in human beings, with a capacity for self-consciousness and symbolic thought, to "a sense of one's own life to be lived."
2. Eve's longing for wisdom is a longing to live according to what is worthy and good, which the tree allegedly provides. But other-regarding conceptions of what is good come from the communities we inhabit: conscience is formed through acculturation

"We are thrown into some context or other in which we find our wills already bound . . . by preestablished other-regarding conceptions of what is good or worthy."

But (1) and (2) are in conflict [centripetal vs. centrifugal, antisocial vs. social]:

"The psychological urgency of self-interest sits uneasily with the other-regarding conceptions of the good that one has absorbed."

Conception of the good as internalized from others can be compromised in fundamental ways: (a) "averaged out" (b) held with dogmatic conviction (c) must be collectively defended against seemingly "existential threat" from other views → "false righteousness"

"Original sin, the sin that comes with the condition of being human, is thus not just the self-will that resists the other-regarding demands built into one's internalized conception of the good. It is self-will combined with a covetous and violent protection of the compromised fruit we have plucked from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. . . . Paradise is not for us because we are by our natures caught in an oscillation between self-will and false righteousness."

Homo Incurvatus in Se

This is Luther's phrase for the human condition of original sin; it includes "works-righteous" behavior, i.e., the respectable life, which is distinct from the ethical life.

"The ethical life is the life whose guiding principle is radical altruism or *agapē*."

The Redeemer?

But if we are "radically evil" (Kant), we can't achieve the ethical life by our own efforts: moral despair seems inevitable without a source of redemption.

If redemptive *katalepsis* (transformative grace from outside ourselves) is possible, are there a multitude of salvific sources or a single source (the Highest One)?

7 After Monotheism

The Highest One

Natural reason teaches that there is no separate creation

"What is called creation is some part or aspect or principle or mode of the Highest One. That is why a worshipful attitude to the whole of reality is not idolatrous."

... and that the goodness of the Highest One cannot be augmented by that of any other being.

The Tetragrammaton

Moses and the burning bush: “I am who I am” → Aquinas: “*Ipsum Esse*” (Being or Existence Itself), i.e., by his theory of analogical predication, that of which all creaturely existents are examples (which means everything exists by participating in Existence Itself)

“We perceive that there are existents; and so the eminent exemplar, Existence Itself, exists. . . . This is not so much an argument for the existence of God as a way of seeing reality so that the question of God’s nonexistence cannot arise.”

Consider also Tillich’s “Ground of our Being, that is, the thing part of whose exemplification is our very existence” and the opening lines of the Tao Te Ching (which affirm the foundational principle pervading and sustaining all manifestation).

Implications for descriptions of God in the three monotheisms?

“If the Highest One has actually announced that he is Being or Existence Itself, then much of what counts as sacred writ and law is merely a projection of our anxieties and fixations onto the Highest One. . . . After Existence Itself comes more clearly into view, it will seem patently idolatrous to regard the anthropomorphic accretions of this or that historical faith as definitive of the Highest One.”

The Paradox of the Highest One

The thought that the Highest One is ontologically prior to all else, that God as absolute source of reality cannot be ontologically dependent on anything else either for its essence or its existence, means the Highest One is *simple*, i.e., has no attributes that can be understood as components of the Highest One or as that which the Highest One instantiates.

But this leaves no place for a “coherent positive conception of God.” The solution of Aquinas and Augustine was that God is somehow identical to his attributes —

“... that God himself is identical with his Goodness, and is identical with his Existence, and with his Justice, and with whatever other attributes are truly predicated of him. This in turn entails that God is a single property or attribute.”

— which, however, is paradoxical:

“Now we are no longer engaging with monotheism at all. The simplest philosophical elaboration of God as the First in the order of being breaks all connection with the monotheistic faiths.”

To address this paradox we need to clarify what it means to think or speak of the Highest One.

Speaking of the Highest One

In all three monotheisms there are theological discussions of “Divine Names,” to answer the question of how to talk about the ineffable: what can “good” or “just” possibly mean when applied to the Highest One?

Maimonides (1135–1204): we may give “honorific titles” to God or assert negative propositions about God, but literal predication of intrinsic attributes of God (positive theology) is idolatrous. However, we may speak *by analogy* of divine actions.

Aquinas (1225–1274): we may reconcile the transcendence of God with some degree of cognitive availability (to render God a coherent object of religious thought and talk) by use of *analogy*. To predicate an attribute of God is to predicate a perfection, by analogy with the corresponding perfection found in creatures. Epistemologically, we proceed from the creaturely to divine attributes; ontologically, God’s perfections are primary, the ground of the corresponding creaturely perfections.

But the paradox remains; the doctrine of analogy is incompatible with the theology of Existence.

“Any differentiated knowledge of the Highest One’s nature will imply that this nature is complex, so that the Highest One is not *a se*, and not first in the order of being”

“We cannot rest content with that paradox. Either the very idea of the Highest One is incoherent, or at least completely beyond us, as in the doctrine of Maimonides, or the argument from the Highest One’s being the source of reality, the First Being, to the simplicity of the Highest One is flawed.”

But perhaps not every whole made up of distinct parts is ontologically subordinate to those parts — we need to explore the idea of *dependent* aspects or constituents of divine nature.

Existents as Dependent Aspects of Existence Itself

Argument from examples (Wittgenstein’s experience of being “absolutely safe” during WWI; parts of the body): dependent parts may be posterior to the whole. Therefore,

“The First Being can be complex, and its attributes need not be identical. And there is, therefore, no need to go all the way to purely negative treatment of divine predication.”

An Alternative to the Thomistic Interpretation of the Highest One

Thomistic interpretation of the Highest One as Existence Itself → Highest One is utterly transcendent, changeless, timeless, self-complete, not a process but an *eidos*, inherently unaffected by its exemplifications.

Alternative interpretation: Highest One is the outpouring of Existence Itself by way of its exemplification in ordinary existents — i.e.,

“a certain kind of activity that could be analogically described as Loving On this second identification, the Highest One is not Being, and not any ordinary existent; it is Being’s Self-Giving.”

8 Process Panentheism

The Goodness of the Highest One

The three monotheisms agree that the Highest One is perfectly good.

(The idolatrous distortion of this thought is that goodness = what is beneficial to human beings, which gives rise to theodicy speculation and doubts that God can be both omnipotent and good.)

Aquinas sees the goodness of God as God’s eminent desirability. But how can an unchanging *eidos* be desirable?

The testimony of the three monotheisms is that God “seeks us out by his own revelation and his prophets in order to lead us to participate in his own self-disclosure.”

“The outpouring of Existence Itself . . . [is] for the sake of the self-disclosure of Existence Itself.”

The Analogy of Logos

Pope Benedict affirmed the analogy between “God’s reason” (God as Logos) and ours.

Benedict: “God does not become more divine when we push him away from us in a sheer, impenetrable voluntarism; rather, the truly divine God is the God who has revealed himself as *logos*.”

Logos in Heraclitus: “preeminent ordering principle . . . that is rational in the sense of meeting the highest standards of intelligibility” → Logos for the Stoics: “a rational divine power that orders and directs the universe,” an idea that lives on in contemporary notions of “natural law.” But Logos in the Gospel of John is more than laws of nature: “principle of intelligibility of all that happens” communicated in the unfolding of the universe and in human history.

This conception of the Highest One as Logos is meant analogically; beware of idolatrous perversions of this idea:

“The Highest One does not deliberate about outcomes. It does not choose, set a course, and then adjust events to keep things on that course. The Highest One is not a Great Controller who intervenes in worldly events for the sake of his consciously formulated ends. He is not another efficient cause, alongside the physical causes.”

Here’s the analogical version:

“What makes the use of the teleological idiom at all helpful here is the revealed idea that the Highest One is not just the source of existence, but is continuously and cumulatively disclosing himself in the universe and in history, and that this is what the universe and human history are for the sake of.”

Process Panentheism

Note that the idea of the Highest One as Logos is derived from revelation. The “phenomenological” approach suspends any doubts about the revelation in order to “test its content against the touchstone of idolatry. Could it be the Highest One who is thus revealed?”

“Here at last we do seem to have a view of God that is at least purged of the *familiar* idolatrous elements.”

The God of “classical theism” is utterly transcendent, outside time, simple, etc. The God of “panentheism” conforms to the motto, “God in all and all in God.” (However: not a pantheistic identification of God with Nature.) God, as a universal process of outpouring and self-disclosure, belongs to category of activity, not of substance.

“As such, God is radically at risk in the world; he needs us just as we need him, for we are the potential sites of his self-disclosure.”

“The choice between classical theism and panentheism is, if you like, a choice between a first principle and the expressive activity of that first principle. The latter is the more inclusive object of worship. . . . In that sense, panentheism appears to provide a more suitable theological description of the Highest One.”

The Self-Disclosure of Existence Itself

Classical theism recapitulates the dualism of Being and Becoming; with Christ’s incarnation is simply an *assertion* that dualism is overcome. Process theology overcomes the dualism more effectively: “The incarnation of the Divine is ubiquitous.”

Consider Heidegger’s critique that the ontology of Plato and Aristotle is “a systematic retreat from a lived sense of Being-making-itself-present” (that is, from “the numinous and the holy”):

“It is this ‘forgetfulness of Being’ that allows us to replace reverence for reality with an instrumental attitude toward our environment, and toward our own lives, so that they become means to power and advantage. . . . Into this dedivinized world, the gods appear as localized pockets of the numinous and the holy . . . [which are] experienced as exceptional, set aside from the mainstream of life as we experience it”

Thus Yahweh responds to this falling away as a jealous God, constantly threatening retaliation, and Allah demands that we continually bring him to mind in all our thoughts and deeds, another way of coping with the dedivination of the world.

The Problem is With the Pantheon

The history of movement from polytheism to henotheism to monotheism does not necessarily result in a transformation in the nature of the survivor god: he can still be worshiped idolatrously. But a religion that embodied panentheism would be a return to “the God before the gods, namely, Being continually making itself present on the holy ground we have always in fact inhabited.”

Speculative propositions about the afterlife represent an aspect of the idolatrous substitute for genuine faith in the importance of goodness. The salvific aspect of panentheism is to enable a new form of life that “finds itself as the expression and the subject of Divine self-disclosure.”

9 Panentheism, Not Pantheism

Distinguishing Panentheism and Pantheism

Some will argue that the distinction between pantheism and panentheism is trivial — if all that exists is the natural realm, then to say that “God *is* the natural realm” is scarcely different from saying that “God *is constituted by* the natural realm.”

But “legitimate naturalism” does not claim that only the natural realm exists; rather, it is the view that all causality within the natural realm involves a purely natural processes, that there is no supernatural causation.

But what else exists outside the natural realm? Some panentheists say, spirit, mind, consciousness — but that (taken to refer to “subjective mental phenomena”) is “a dead end” motivated by the attempt to make oneself the source of intelligibility.

Instead, it is *intelligibility* that exists outside the natural realm. However, exploring this idea involves some side-tracking into “philosophical trench warfare.”

Presence

Heidegger: The “natural realm” is a kind of abstraction, created by forgetfulness of Being-making-itself-present. He distinguishes two conceptions of truth: (1) correspondence between proposition and fact (dominant in history of metaphysics and theology) and (2) disclosure of Being (Greek *alētheia* = *Unverborgenheit*).

“Only because beings are disclosed to us do we have access to the propositions that are the bearers of truth understood as correspondence to the facts; without such disclosure the very propositions that are the content of our thought and talk, and of our scientific theories of the natural realm, would not be accessible to us. So truth-as-disclosure is prior to truth-as-correspondence.”

At least in this regard Heidegger is on the right track:

“The presence of Being, its giving itself as the content of intelligible experience and thought, is very difficult to bring into view ... because our whole way of thinking about mind and reality, and hence about presence and disclosure, is conditioned by a misplaced idea of representation.”

Presence as Disclosure

Examples from perception, bodily sensation, mental experience: **THERE** those qualities, objects of judgment/belief are. The connection between a state that makes something present and *what* it makes present is not accidental.

“Perceptual experiences, somatic experiences, and thoughts are individuated by the very items they present or make available, and by the ways in which they present or make available those items.”

Is Being Almost Entirely Wasted?

The standard view of the relation between consciousness and reality treats us as beings whose psychological operations are the very preconditions of presence or disclosure. This view is hardly ever even stated, since it seems to be “the most obvious common sense, a bedrock starting point.” For alternative views, read Spinoza, Maimonides, Ibn Sina — or Aristotle’s statement about Active Intellect:

“[M]ind as we have describe it is what it is by virtue of becoming all things, while there is another Mind which is what it is by virtue making all things be present: this is a sort of positive state like light.” (*De Anima*, book 3, ch. 5)

In these thinkers, the idea of mind is thoroughly objective and presence is “already fully actualized, independently of the psychological operations of particular human beings.”

The standard contemporary view: we are Producers of Presence; the alternative view: we are Samplers of Presence, where Being is by its nature present and its fundamental activity is self-disclosure.

Ubiquitous Presence

The view that we are Producers of Presence depends on “the hypothesis of natural representation” — that inner mental states are *of* or *about* scenes in the external world thanks to a mix of causation and resemblance.

“A scene in the external world causes one’s brain to go into a certain natural representational state; that state is appropriately caused by the scene and in a certain way resembles it ... That scene becomes present ... *to a subject* ... [W]ithout natural representations there is no presence.”

Against Natural Representation

Several examples whose analysis reveals that “our intentional attitude directed to [an] image” is crucial and calls into question “any reductive account of intentionality that relies on ‘natural representation’ as its inspiration.”

Representation and "Carrying Information"

Examination of the view that representational states “carry” descriptive information. A refutation would be similar to that of a parallel thesis about the reference of names (Kripke).

Can Causation Account For Aboutness?

Critique of the view that intentionality can be understood in terms of “some relevant pattern of causal connection.”

What Could Replace the Representationalist Tradition?

The attempt over 40 years to reduce intentionality can be summarized:

“If we take *aboutness* to be a relation holding contingently between a (re)presentation and an item it is supposedly about, then we do not find any good account of what that relation is. ... [T]he favorable mix of description and causation seems to have eluded us.”

The key problem is accounting for the immediate *availability* of that which comes to us in experience — that is, the fact that the objects of perception, for example, are THERE and thereby available for demonstration, talk, and thought.

A Diagnosis of the Representationalist's Mistake

Adapt Frege's idea of "modes of presentation," which are objective features of things themselves. A subjective mental act is an act of accessing a mode of presentation, individuated in part by what is presented. Applies to abstract objects, too.

"[M]odes of presentation are not mental; they are objective, in that they come with the objects themselves as the very features of those objects that make them available for demonstration, thought, and talk."

"[N]one of this is at odds with the causal completeness of brain science, taken on its own terms. As a result of my brain going into a certain state, I access a particular mode of presentation of a particular item. That is how I come to think about about the item. This is no less empirical or naturalistic than the alternative explanation [i.e., based on the theory of representation]. . . . *These are two theories that are equally compatible with the very same patterns of causation in the brain and the sensory system.*"

A Transformed Picture of "Consciousness" and Reality

Presence is not a subjective phenomenon. The events that fill our so-call subjective mental lives are objective psychological occurrences whose contents are objective modes of presentation, which are standing properties of the objects themselves that in turn enable the objects to become intelligible to the intellect.

"We are not Producers of Presence; that is, we are not beings whose psychological operations are the preconditions of presence. . . . [T]he basic reality is not the fact of consciousness, understood as the inner achievement of a mind. It is the fact of the continuous and multifaceted disclosure of objects, which certain evolved animals are able to access."

Confirming the Surprising Hypothesis

A thought experiment that aims to show that presence is not mind-dependent — that we are Samplers, not Producers, of Presence.

10 The Mind of God

The Objectivity of the Realm of Sense

Synopsis: we are Samplers of Presence, and "what we call individual consciousness is no more than a particular history of sampling from this vast realm, a history of accessing manners of presentation."

How the Structure of Presence Might Impose Evolutionary Constraints

If "the vast totality of modes of presentation" has a structure or set of specific limits, it might well impose constraints on the forms of conscious bodily life that could evolve, i.e., the "antecedent structure of modes of presentation of the items that make up the environment" could impose selective pressure on the development of, e.g., perceptual organs and especially on the development of intellectual life.

For example, the development of color perception, useful for locating food, etc. (which has taken different paths in different species). Another example – mathematics:

"It need not be supposed that the numbers themselves could have any causal efficacy; still the objective structure of mathematical reality will impose a variety of fates, promising and unpromising, on any living thing that is becoming numerate."

If Objective Mind is taken to refer to the totality of objective modes of presentation, then it can be understood to "set limits on which forms of mental life will be viable."

"So it is at least in principle possible . . . that what takes place in the development of the neural basis of mind is partly ordained by the independent structure of presence, that is, by Objective Mind."

Objective Mind and the Mind of the Highest One

The vast totality of modes of presentation admits of ranking: some will be illusory, inadequate, or incomplete, and so there will selective advantage in evolution in improving access to modes of presentation:

“[T]here does seem to be some competitive advantage conferred by shedding illusion and clarifying our thoughts into an increasingly integrated explanatory structure. The resulting, more accurate forms of understanding will exploit more and more adequate and complete modes of presentation.”

Let us call the idealized limit of the process of deepening understanding “the Divine Mind,” which

“may be construed as the totality of fully adequate and complete modes of presentation of reality. Of course, this is an ideal limit, and who can tell what transformations of individual minds and bodily structures would be required to better approximate it.”

The Doubly Donatory Character of Reality

We distinguish a Realm of Nature and a Realm of Sense [=intelligibility], but in fact there is only Reality-making-itself-present-to-beings, which is to say:

“the outpouring of Being itself by way of its exemplification in ordinary beings and its self-disclosure to some of those beings, [which view of the world] supports a profound background feeling of gratitude in response to the ‘double donatory’ character of reality.”

... double in that (1) I am an expression of Being Itself and (2) all has been made available to me. This recognition can help one overcome the condition of *incurvatus in se* and turn instead towards reality and others.

Does God Exist?

Do these reflections support the existence of the God of the three monotheisms? All three are religions of salvation history, and “the only God they will recognize is a God in search of us.” The truth of monotheism turns on “an absolutely special place for us” — which the author asserts to be “incredible.”

The God of panentheism, on the other hand, even with the teleological idiom (“for the sake of self-disclosure”) would not be inconsistent with legitimate naturalism.

The Highest One

After purging idolatrous elements from familiar conceptions of God and recognizing that a true conception of God must be consistent with legitimate naturalism, we arrive at this:

“The Highest One = the outpouring of Being by way of its exemplification in ordinary existents for the sake of the self-disclosure of being.”

Analogically understood, the Highest One has characteristics of a person (Love: its outpouring in ordinary existents; Will: its self-disclosure; Mind: its most revealing presentations; Power: the totality of the laws of nature). At the same time, this analogical sense of person discourages “the idolatrous hope for a Cosmic Intervener who might confer special worldly advantages on his favorites.”

“The meaning of the book of Job is ... the moral and religious irrelevance of Yahweh and all the putative Cosmic Interveners. ... Indeed, Job’s trust looks as if it already somehow directed toward a Higher One. ... It is Job ... who brings about the true Götterdämmerung.”

11 Christianity Without Spiritual Materialism

Religion and Violence

What can we make of the apparent connection between supernaturalist theism and violence perpetrated in the name of God? Starting point: René Girard's theology of religious violence.

The Gospel According to Girard

According to Girard, man's natural state is internecine tension produced by common objects of desire (envy). Cathartic deliverance and social solidarity are produced when the tension is resolved — characteristically, by the killing of a scapegoat. Eventually, religion provided sacrificial ritual to resolve the tension: religiously legitimated social order is based on murder of the scapegoat.

Yahweh's enforcement of Mosaic Law provided an innovation: covenant with Israel to secure social order in exchange for obedience.

The purpose of Christ's sacrifice and death is finally to bring sacrificial religion to an end: salvation comes through imitation of Christ's self-sacrificing love.

Where is Original Sinfulness?

But Girard misconstrued original sin and hence the salvific role of Christ.

“Upon examination, it appears that there is no real original sinfulness in Girard, just an unfortunate response (sacrificial religion) to an unfortunate upshot (envy) of a method of learning (mimesis). . . . Without original sinfulness, Christianity has no answer to the Greek idea that the ethical consists simply in the virtuous life.”

Original Sinfulness as Self-Will and False Righteousness

Eve's error was (1) self-will/disobedience combined with (2) the aspiration to possess knowledge of how to live,

“... a correct conception of good and evil ... as if it were something fixed and complete like an ideal commodity, as if it were something that could be possessed by human beings.”

Supernatural theism provides a more effective solution to original sinfulness than sacrificial scapegoating: the Law is established and enforced by Yahweh, who can search every heart and has enormous capacity for retributive violence.

But the greatness of Judaism is that

“... Yahweh has a surprising second life; he evolves from the threatening giver and enforcer of the Law to the one whose prophets call for justice and mercy.”

Christ Destroys the Kingdom of Self-Will and False Righteousness

What Christ challenges is the very idea of ready-to-wear righteousness that can be possessed, threatening Israel's covenantal privilege, etc., etc. His outrageous behavior provokes the violent reaction of the legitimate religious authorities, the guardians of righteousness. He offers no alternative “right way to live” to replace that of the legitimate righteousness, other than the 2 impossible commandments about *agapē*.

“The Crucifixion discloses *how far we are prepared to go* in order to defend our idolatrous attachment to one of another adventitious form of righteousness. ... This is why it is crucial for the existence of the depth-psychological and salvific world of Christianity that Christ be killed by ‘legitimate’ state and religious violence. ... [S]elf-love and false righteousness—that is to say, the central elements of the characteristically human form of life—no longer make up a *defensible* realm.”

Contrast between the death of Socrates and the Passion of Christ — the former leaves the false righteousness of Athenian respectability legitimated [really?] and the tragedy softened by a doctrine of the afterlife, whereas the latter [as long as we don't make too much of the Resurrection?]

“. . . leaves us at a total loss. We can return to human ways of going on only if we forget what happened. If we do not forget, we need to find a way to live that is not some form of self-love and false righteousness. And if we do not forget, we know that we cannot find this in ourselves. Then, and only then, are we prepared to take the two commandments, the salvation from without, seriously.”

The Afterlife as an Idolatrous Conceit

The foregoing is a “naturalistic construal of the Crucifixion.” What of resurrection and afterlife?

Jesus says, “My Kingdom is not of this world.” But this is not “a supernatural Kingdom, replete with special causal powers and agencies” but rather “an animating part of ‘this world,’ . . . [where] the worldliness of self-love and false righteousness is shed in favor of *agapē*.”

Critique of Paul, for whom afterlife (“our own bodily resurrection and, if we have lived a Christ-centered life, eternal reward in the Kingdom of Heaven”) is the keystone of faith. Otherwise, Paul would abandon Christ!

Paul (1Cor 15): “[I]f Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. . . . If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.”

“The ‘bodily’ resurrection, as Paul understand it, is not just a contentious point of metaphysics; it is a leftover of Paul’s Pharisaical past. And yet he holds to it as a condition of Christ’s being the savior. *Here we have the real despoliation of Christ.*”

The idea of afterlife has little place in Judaism (except in the tradition of the Pharisees, who may well have adopted it from Greek sources, with echoes of reincarnation).

“One of the great signs that Judaism, despite all the depredations of the early Yahweh, remains a higher religion, is its relative indifference, excepting the tradition of the Pharisees, to the very idea of the afterlife.”

Ancient ideas of afterlife are idolatrous: they promise an “*endless satisfaction* of our acquisitive desires.”

Against "Man's Quest For Meaning"

The quest-for-meaning movement is superficial and idolatrous.

“The demand that you live a meaningful life is an inflated form of acquisitive desire and an ultimate reservation about how far you would go in modeling yourself on the kenotic self-abandonment that is God. Look instead to the self-disclosure of the Highest One as outpouring Life, Intelligibility, and Love, and find your life-ordering demands there.”

“The idea of an afterlife that would make it finally all better, or at least finally very meaningful, depends on a radical underestimation of what can actually happen to you in this life. Salvation is not making it all better; it is the grace of finding a way to live that keeps faith with the importance of goodness and love even in the face of everything that can happen to you.”

The Afterlife as Resistance to Christ

Another function of afterlife: when circumstances intensify the disjunction between being ethical and being happy, the demand for justice gives rise to belief in an afterlife.

Kant: being ethical means being worthy of happiness → it is rational to hope for an afterlife; without this hope we are subject to moral discouragement. But Kant misses the meaning of the suffering and death of Christ.

Spinoza had a better understanding:

Spinoza: “[T]he resurrection of Christ from the dead was in reality spiritual, and to the faithful alone, according to their understanding, it was revealed that Christ was endowed with eternity. . . . Moreover, He, to this extent, raises his disciples from the dead, in so far as they follow his example of His own life and death.”

“Belief in the afterlife as a reward for faithfulness is either an idolatrous conceit or evidence of a failure to assimilate the radical nature of Christ’s new dispensation.”

Naturalism’s Gift: Resurrection Without the Afterlife

Spinoza’s statement (above) is not metaphorical — he has a view of “eternity” that (1) is consistent with his rejection of supernaturalism, and (2) allows him to assert that some part of the human mind is eternal (cf. Aristotle’s Active Mind). But it’s too much to go into here.

Legitimate naturalism provides another “intriguing theological possibility” suggesting a “way beyond death” through denial of a “soul” that exists distinct from our brains and bodies. Our personal identity over time is based not on the persistence of a soul but is determined by our patterns of self-concern projected into the future.

“The demise of the soul, and hence of the self, means that the extent and focus of one’s special concern is not antecedently justified by an independently persisting entity that itself determines the temporal and spatial extent of who we care. Rather, our temporal and spatial extent is determined by our pattern of special concern. This is the new ‘Copernican Revolution’ induced by naturalism’s (re)discovery that there is no self behind our mental functioning.”

That is, the commandment to love others as oneself is “an *identity-reconstituting* command.” Moreover,

“[T]o the extent that one carries out this commandment, one becomes present wherever and whenever human beings are present; one lives on in the onward rush of humankind . . . for one stands to all others in the identity-constituting relation that one formerly stood in just to oneself.”

“Christ conquers death on our behalf by ideally exemplifying *agapē*, and stimulating it in us.”

Postscript

Here’s a nice summary:

“Our exploration of the ban on idolatry has led us to an idea of the Most High as the one whose transcendence is just the other side of his immanence in this world. This world, properly seen, is the outpouring and self-disclosure that is the Highest One. This outpouring and self-disclosure, this kenosis or self-emptying of Being that envelops everything, is the site of the sacred. So we are ‘already on holy ground.’ A saved human being is just a finite manifestation of the kenosis, filled with an awareness of itself as such, an awareness made manifest in that human being’s turn toward reality and the real needs of others.”

And as far as afterlife and heaven are concerned, the “other world” is simply “this world properly received.”

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