

**IN QUEST OF AUTHENTIC DIVINITY:  
CRITICAL NOTICE OF MARK JOHNSTON'S  
SAVING GOD: RELIGION AFTER IDOLATRY**

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**Mark Johnston. *Saving God: Religion After Idolatry*,  
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Johnston describes *Saving God*, in a preface, as ‘the expression of a certain sensibility’ that ‘contains some philosophy but is not a work of philosophy’ (p. xi). It is true that the main negative thesis of *Saving God* is the rejection of ‘supernaturalism’, with its conception of God as a personal agent who creates the Universe *ex nihilo* and intervenes in its history to salvific purpose. And it is also true that, for Johnston, ‘the crux of supernaturalist belief’ is ‘belief in life after death’. For his critique of this belief, and thus what he himself counts as his ‘*philosophical* defence of the spiritual irrelevance of supernaturalism’ (p. xi), Johnston directs the reader to his subsequent book, *Surviving Death*.<sup>1</sup> It by no means follows, however, that *Saving God* is not a work of philosophy. I found reading *Saving God* an exhilarating experience and I refuse to agree that such an unputdownable book is not an authentic work of philosophy! In this article, I hope to show, to the contrary, that *Saving God* should be taken seriously as a significant original contribution to the Philosophy of Religion, even though it may also serve as its author’s spiritual manifesto.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Johnston, *Surviving Death* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010). Johnston’s attempt in this book – the Carl G. Hempel lecture series – to provide understandings of the self and personal identity that support a purely naturalistic account of surviving death is a work of great philosophical interest. Here, however, I confine myself to discussing *Saving God*.

### Conceptions of God and the fear of idolatry

One source of my exhilaration is Johnston's focus on *what can count as an adequate conception of God*, while 'bracketing out' the question of the justifiability of believing that God exists. This is a breath of fresh air for debates that simply assume the *personal omniGod* conception of the divine, according to which God is 'an all-powerful, all-knowing, wholly good person (a person without a body) who has created us and our world.'<sup>2</sup> God has, of course, been thought of differently: classical theism conceives of God as atemporal, immutable, impassible, necessary and simple, and treats talk of God as 'a' personal agent as analogical. But many would think that whatever can be retained of classical theism must be *religiously*, and not merely metaphysically, adequate: an adequate conception of God has to fit the relevant 'forms of life'. On that score, many would suppose, the personal omniGod conception is the best we can do.

A second occasion for exhilaration, therefore, is that Johnston challenges supernaturalist theism *on religious grounds*. He does this by emphasising the fear of idolatry intrinsic to theistic consciousness. Not only have the theistic traditions historically used a 'rhetoric of idolatrousness' to challenge their rivals, they are also subject to potential *self-criticism* since what they take to be God ('their god', with a small 'g') *may not actually be* the true God (with a capital 'G'). There is no privileged access to the knowledge that one believes in God: 'the best thing a believer can say in response to the question "Do you believe in God?" is "I can only hope that I do. I can only hope that I actually stand in a tradition in which God has genuinely revealed himself"' (p. 10).

'God', then, is not a proper name, but a descriptive name, a 'compressed title' (p. 6), and there is a real question whether whatever one takes to deserve that title actually deserves it. Under his 'phenomenological approach', Johnston considers whether specific candidates for what we might call the 'God-role' would, if they existed, be fit to play that role. Any such candidate that does not fit that role would then, if it existed, be an idol, and worshipping it, whether it existed or not, idolatry.

#### Characterising the 'God-role': the Highest One, who brings salvation

How is this 'God-role' to be characterised? Johnston settles on descriptions that result from considering what it is that an idol counterfeits – namely,

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<sup>2</sup> The description is Plantinga's (*Warranted Christian Belief*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) , p. 3): 'omniGod' connotes the 'omni'-properties, omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing) and omnibenevolent (all-loving).

a proper object of worship. God is 'the Most High' or 'the Highest One', and the One 'from whom (or from which) flows our salvation' (p. 12).

Johnston offers a religiously 'neutral' account of salvation as properly coming to terms with the 'large scale structural defects in human life that no amount of psychological adjustment or practical success can free us from', including 'arbitrary suffering, aging (once it has reached the corrosive stage), our profound ignorance of our condition, the isolation of ordinary self-involvement, the vulnerability of everything we cherish to time and chance, and, finally, to untimely death' (p. 15). *Properly* dealing with these defects requires self-transformation, with the development of the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. Johnston contrasts such authentic salvation with the 'spiritual materialism' that simply extends egotistic self-involvement into a 'supposedly spiritual realm' (pp. 15-6). Johnston allows that there may be several 'orientations' – including atheistic ones – that enable one to live authentically while neither denying nor resisting the 'structural defects' of human existence. What he insists upon, though, is that authentic belief in God must be such an orientation: for believers 'the Highest One comes into view, with salvific effect' (p. 16), and does so, as Johnston emphasises at the outset, through God's own self-revelation: 'God is transcendent; that is, God can come into view, if he comes into view at all, only as a result of his self-presentation.' (p. 1)

With this apparatus in place, Johnston's essay seeks to explain and motivate (if not 'philosophically' defend) both the negative claim that a supernatural being would not be fit for the God-role and a positive, 'process panentheistic', proposal about what would.

### **The supernatural God as idol?**

Consider, first, Johnston's negative claim. One might complain that a supernatural personal agent is anthropomorphic. That would not suffice to show that it could not be the Highest One, however. *Some* degree of anthropomorphism in our understanding of God may be inevitable: the question is where to draw the line. Perhaps Marcion and the Gnostics were right: the Yahweh-character of the Hebrew Bible cannot be the Highest One given the ruthless tyrannical behaviour he sometimes exhibits. And Johnston may be right that the involvement of a supernatural God in a 'demonic mix' concocted by a priestly caste who exercise social control through fear of God's power over an 'afterlife' yields idolatrous worship and the 'spiritual materialism' that blocks

the self-transformation needed for salvation (see pp. 24-5). We may, however, conceive of a perfectly good supernatural personal agent as purified of his ancient role as tribal champion, and as granting eternal life to all who will receive it. A personal omniGod may thus still be the best candidate for the Highest One: what else, after all, apart from truly benign supernatural power could liberate us from those 'large scale structural defects'?

### Criteria for authentic divinity

As noted, we do not get, in this book, Johnston's full argument for the inevitability of idolatrousness when a supernatural God is worshipped. But we do get a helpful discussion of a vital methodological issue raised by the need to determine whether a particular god is the true God. From where do the relevant criteria arise? Johnston cites Psalm 82 as 'set[ting] out a criterion of godliness, a criterion that in its turn applies to the Highest One'. ('Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute, Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hands of the wicked.') Johnston then aptly asks: 'But to accept it as a correct criterion, do we not have to take the psalm as expressing the view of the Highest One himself? If so, it is an enclosed circle, into which we cannot break, unless we have some antecedent conception of the Highest One.' Johnston therefore concludes that we must have such a conception: knowledge of the divine – negative knowledge, at least – 'could be the deliverance of some antecedent religious sense of things' (p. 56).

From a theistic perspective an 'antecedent religious sense of things' would, of course, itself be a gift of God's grace. But theism standardly distinguishes between God's special revelation and his general revelation, and a prior sense of what makes for – or, anyway, falls short of – authentic divinity may belong to the latter. Johnston argues that '[t]he logic of seeing and hearing *as* makes some antecedent religious sense of things a *precondition* of the revelation of the Highest One. Yes, God is transcendent, and so known *de re* to us only by his revelation; but for that revelation to occur, there must be *de dicto* knowledge of something of the nature of the Highest One' (p. 69). The kind of knowledge presupposed seems to be, or, at least, to include *moral* knowledge – witness the Psalm 82 criterion, for example, and the reasons for denying that the tribalist Yahweh or the God who rules by fear of the loss of eternal reward could be the Highest One.

Counting such moral knowledge as part of God's general revelation appears to depend on that knowledge being widely, even universally and innately, held. But, in fact it is not. Yahweh's tribalist championing of 'his people' to the point of commanding them to perform acts of genocide (see, for example, Joshua 6:20-1) surely *was* seen as compatible with Yahweh's greatness in the relevant historical context. The idea that 'God has no favourites, but that anybody of any nationality who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him' (Acts 11:34-5) *had to be developed*. From a theistic perspective, then, much of our moral knowledge must ultimately be attributable to God's *special* revelation. So perhaps the circularity is not easily avoided: perhaps the very knowledge presupposed by the possibility of recognising experience *as* revelatory of the Highest One must itself arise from just such experiences of revelation?

**Internal criteria of religious falsehood:  
a requirement of substantive rationality?**

Purely *external* criteria for authentic divinity and genuine revelation will not be religiously acceptable, so the question is – as Johnston expresses it in the title of his Chapter 5 – whether there can be 'an *internal* criterion of religious falsehood' (my emphasis). Johnston makes two proposals as to how the needed criteria may arise within the religious traditions.

The first is to adopt Pope Benedict's reasoning in his notorious Regensburg lecture. Benedict follows the Byzantine emperor Manuel II in holding that 'God acts, *syn logo*, with *logos*', where, as the Pope puts it, '*Logos* means both reason and word – a reason which is creative and capable of self-communication, precisely as reason. John [the Evangelist]', the Pope continues, 'thus spoke the final word on the biblical concept of God, and in this word all the often toilsome and tortuous threads of biblical faith find their culmination and synthesis' (quoted by Johnston, p. 72). Benedict, Johnston explains, 'interprets *Logos* as publicly accessible reason understood as an objective constraint on all actual reasoning and communication' (pp. 72-3), and treats 'the insertion of [this] Greek theme ... into biblical faith ... [as] ordained' – as '*a new step in the ongoing revelation of God's nature*' (Johnston's emphasis, p. 73). 'From the very heart of Christian faith, and at the same time, the heart of Greek thought now joined to faith, Manuel II was able to say: Not to act "with *logos*" is contrary to God's nature' – a quotation from the Pope again (p. 73). We may be sure, then, that trying to spread the faith 'by the sword' cannot accord with the divine will. Placing God somehow 'above

reason' is a serious mistake – and one which, as Johnston observes, the Pope attributes as much to key thinkers in Protestant Christianity as to important strands in Islam.

How robust a criterion of authentically revealed truth do we get from accepting 'that the deliverances of reason are an ineliminable part of the full revelation itself ... and have a kind of veto power over other purported Judeo-Christian revelations ...' (p. 75)? Johnston emphasises that the rationality here appealed to is *substantive* rationality, not merely formal rationality. Torturing heretics to save their immortal souls (for example) does not involve any 'mistake in mathematical logic' nor 'failure to apply the canons of decision theory'. 'Still it is perverse. ... to require torture for salvation could not lie in the nature of the Highest One.' (p. 76) This is something we know, Johnston says, 'by the light of natural reason'. He adds: 'The truly remarkable element in Benedict's lecture is that these naturally knowable propositions, propositions known to Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, form part of full Christian revelation, rather than merely providing an extraneous criterion for religious falsity.' (p. 76)

One may sense a conjuring trick here. If the substantive constraints on authentic revelation are 'known by the light of natural reason', then they *are* external to, and independent of, whatever is claimed to be known through *special* divine revelation. The incorporation of what is known by the light of natural reason within an *overall* theistic epistemology makes no difference to that. Of course, the theist will need to see 'revelation through natural reason' as part of God's *general* providential dispensation: but these constraints will still be an external corrective over what may be accepted as specially revealed.

More disturbingly, though, a little reflection casts doubt on the claim that it is 'the light of natural reason' that makes it clear that the Highest One could not will salvation through torture. Patently, it is not the case that every properly functioning human agent has accepted the substantive irrationality of torturing people for their own supposed ultimate good – and Johnston's discussion, it seems to me, is not sufficiently sensitive to this, disconcertingly chilling, fact. Our consensus (such that it is) that torture is absolutely uncontestable is something that has had *to develop*. In general, claims about what is substantively rational are in principle contestable and often contested: consider, for instance, the Pope's views on same-sex relations or the use of certain methods of contraception. In fact, then, what constrains claims to special revelation are *moral* claims, in so far as they are endorsed. And, although some basic

moral claims may be so entrenched – even, perhaps, innately so – that our not endorsing them is just not an option (they seem given ‘by the light of natural reason’), this, perhaps lamentably, does *not* apply to claims forbidding torture nor the use of violence to spread conformity to ‘the true faith’. Nevertheless, we surely do want to say that the endorsement of moral claims such as these has vital weight in determining that the voice of one who urges torture or violence for noble ends cannot be the voice of the Most High. But how may such moral constraints be accepted from a perspective that rests ultimately on *special* revelation? Johnston has a second proposal for an ‘internal criterion of religious falsehood’ that suggests a promising answer.

### **Discerning authentic divinity: a matter for judgment?**

Johnston reminds us that scientific knowledge develops under conditions of fallibility. That explains ‘the open-ended and self-critical orientation of the best science, in which the practice is not to defend the best theory we have so far, but to look for new observations that will falsify [that] theory and so force [it] to undergo evolution towards (what we hope is) a better approximation to the truth’ (p. 77). Science has an agreed internal criterion of the falsity of scientific theories, ‘namely, their implying something ultimately at odds with observation’ (p. 77). We may thus, by analogy, think of the theistic traditions as developing their knowledge of God and God’s will under conditions of fallibility, with their internal criterion for the falsity of putative special revelations having, as its germ (to use Johnston’s term), the requirement that the One who supposedly thereby reveals himself must not be an idol. But where do we obtain the criteria relevant to *that* requirement? Whence arise the criteria of non-idolatrousness? As we have been arguing, they seem to have to come by means of special revelation itself.

The comparison with science shows us that this looming circularity need not be vicious. Johnston observes that, ‘as Pierre Duhem famously pointed out, judging whether a given scientific theory meets the internal requirement of ‘[not] being ultimately at odds with observation is no simple matter’ (pp. 77-8). Given the ineliminability of ‘auxiliary hypotheses that bridge the gap between theory, experimental design, and human observation’ (p. 78), there is never a pure, unmediated, clash between what theory predicts and what is observed. It is *a matter for judgment* whether any such apparent clash is a genuine counter-instance or attributable to some hidden variable that leaves the theory intact.

Johnston reports C.G. Hempel as observing that ‘part of the training in any given science, and in its characteristic art of generalization, is acquiring knowledge, often largely tacit knowledge, of what would count as an irrelevant confounding variable, as against a genuine counterexample’ (pp. 78-9). This knowledge, Johnston argues, ‘falls outside the purview of any formal theory of induction or probabilistic reasoning’ (p. 79). It is knowledge that may be acquired only through the developing collective practices of particular sciences. It is neither imposed from outside these practices, nor able to be precisely formulated within them. Yet it provides real and meaningful constraints on whether given scientific theories are, or are not, properly accepted.

Similarly, then, it may be maintained that a long-standing collective practice of distinguishing between authentic and spurious revelations has developed, and continues to develop, *within* the theistic religious traditions. Johnston does not make this point explicitly, but it does seem implied by his comparison with the practice of science. Admittedly, Johnston’s notion of an ‘antecedent religious sense of things’ will now need to be clarified: there may be no sense of what does and does not deserve worship *generally* antecedent to theistic religion, only a sense of authentic divinity *developed within religious traditions* that stands antecedently to *particular* claims to special revelation. No such particular claims can ever be, baldly, self-certifying.

### **Discerning authentic divinity: ‘honest ecumenism’ and the wider moral consensus**

The constraints against idolatry and specious revelation need not, then, be imposed on a religious tradition from outside, nor be open to precise formulation within it. Yet the required discernment is a high art, and a continually developing one, that belongs to the heart of the tradition. As the comparison with the conduct of fallible science may suggest, however, wise practitioners of this high art must be catholic in their openness to potential sources of improved discernment. For a start, receiving insight from neighbouring Abrahamic traditions should not be excluded. Johnston is rightly critical (see pp. 29-33) of a superficial ecumenism that too easily proclaims that Jews, Christians and Muslims worship the same God (as if ‘God’ were an established proper name), when each faith affirms distinct and mutually incompatible descriptions of Who that God is. But he does allow, I think, an ‘honest ecumenism’ (p. 77) that accepts the absolute unity of the Highest One and treats



revelations of his Nature as partial and fallible, even when entrenched in a specific tradition.

To be truly honest, however, ‘honest ecumenism’ may not limit its inclusiveness to the theist traditions – not, anyway, if it is motivated by desire to worship ‘in spirit and in truth’. If it is to grow, wisdom in discerning idols must take account of (while also, of course, contributing to) the widest moral consensus, and be informed by our best scientific understandings of human individual and social existence, and by compassionate historical understanding, especially of misplaced religious or ‘ultimate’ commitment.

### **Overcoming self-centredness: a feature of the God-role**

The need for idol-busters to appeal to our widest moral consensus raises the question why commitment to that moral consensus is not good enough, without religious trappings. Johnston claims a link between God and authentic moral practice by arguing that secular morality lacks an account of how humans may be properly ethically motivated. Something has to overcome ‘our fallen natures’ (p. 81), ‘the centripetal force of the self’ (p. 82). Johnston offers a notably Pauline and Lutheran account of our nature as ‘deeply curved in on itself (*incurvatus in se*): ‘each sets his own interest up as an overriding principle of his will, so that each is really an enemy of the others and the ethical itself’ (p. 91). But the ethical ideal, Johnston argues, is *agape*, which he identifies as a life of radical altruism, in which ‘the legitimate interests of others, in so far as you can anticipate them, will figure on a par with your own legitimate interests in your practical reasoning’ (p. 90).

Kant thought that actually achieving the ethical ideal requires believing that all and only those deserving happiness ultimately possess it – and, therefore, in freedom of the will, immortality, and a God who is our judge. But believing in these things, Johnston says, ‘cannot redeem us from the condition of being *incurvatus in se*’ (p. 91). ‘Is it not the case,’ Johnston asks, ‘that the existence of a redeemer, a source of grace – that is, something transformative entering from outside our fallen natures – is also in need of being deduced as another “postulate of practical reason”, a belief required if we are to avoid moral despair?’ (p. 93) Authentic moral life would then require openness to such sources of grace – many and various as they may be. If the Highest One is ‘to be of salvific interest’, Johnston concludes, it must be the ‘common source’ (p. 94) of

transformative grace, and submission to it will be necessary if we are to live well.

Johnston is surely right in holding, in effect, that moral philosophy should concern itself, not only with the content and nature of moral ideals, but with the possibility of our really achieving them. Arguably, only when this latter question comes in view does the role of religious belief in ethical living become clear. Redemption may be needed, however, not only from individual self-centredness, but also from whatever blocks our *collectively* achieving the highest *social and ecological* ideals. Collective and institutional ‘original sin’ may need to be the focus of a contemporary soteriology, and the role of the ‘saving God’ filled by something great enough to transform our corporate, political and environmental life.

### **The search for alternatives to (assumedly) idolatrous supernaturalism**

In sum, then, Johnston’s discussion of the fear of idolatry as the spur to religious thinking provides a good basis for a working account of the ‘God-role.’ Such an account will explain how belief in God functions in the religious life, and point the way to religiously acceptable criteria of authentic divinity. As noted, Johnston believes that the supernatural personal omniGod is an idol – through its entanglement with an economy of personal immortality, whose rejection Johnston defends elsewhere. But even if an afterlife *is, contra* Johnston, accessible to us, there may still be grounds for rejecting the personal omniGod. It may plausibly be argued, for example, that the notion that God is a personal agent who first causally sustains and then wonderfully redeems participants in horrendous evils (as depicted, say, in a sophisticated theodicy such as Marilyn Adams’s) places God in an overall relationship with created persons that cannot be perfectly loving, and so ensures that such a God is not the Highest One. Let me here set aside, however, the attempt to justify the claim that a non-idolatrous God must differ from the personal omniGod, and just assume its truth in order to consider Johnston’s suggested alternative conception of the divine.

### **Can there be a naturalist theism?**

Johnston rejects supernaturalism. Whatever conception of God he favours, then, must be ‘naturalist’ – but in what sense? Theism can be a form of naturalism, Johnston thinks, without succumbing to the ‘scientism’ that interprets God as a postulate in a scientific theory, the egregious error of that ‘undergraduate atheist’ Dawkins (p. 38). For science to

refute religion, as Dawkins supposes, we would need ‘the singular scientific result that there is no authentic source of existential strength’ (p. 44). Of course, there can be no such result. It is the ‘methodological naïveté’ (p. 47) of scientism to forget that natural scientific knowledge can achieve its explanatory generality only by abstracting away from the more concrete but ‘less tractable aspects of reality’ (p. 46).

If God ‘as authentic source of existential strength’ is real, what ontological status does his reality have? If he does not inhabit a separate supernatural realm, he must somehow belong to the one ‘natural’ realm. What feasible criterion do we have of belonging to the one natural realm, however, other than being ultimately describable in physical terms and being governed by physical laws? As Johnston puts it, ‘every event will admit of a description of its *ultimate material constituents* in a vocabulary that allows those constituents to be brought under the aegis of natural laws’ (p. 49). Meeting this criterion is quite inclusive: natural ontology is not reduced to the bare fundamentals of physical theory, but includes biological entities and – on a physicalist view – psychological states and events and intentional actions.

Could God belong to the one natural realm according to this criterion? Would we not land back in ‘scientism’ if we supposed so? Not necessarily, as reflection on the ontology of intentional agency suggests. It is arguable that intentional actions are ultimately constituted by complex physical events, yet are not the proper object of any natural science, since they are explicable by intentional explanations which differ, in their implicit normativity, from scientific explanations. The modest claim that this Davidsonian view is at least possibly true is enough to show that something can belong to the one natural order through its physical constitution without necessarily being intelligible within an ideally completed natural science. That could also in principle be the case with a ‘natural’ God.

### **Johnston’s process pantheism**

Any such naturalist conception may seem inevitably pantheistic. However, Johnston’s positive account is, he claims, not a pantheism but a ‘process pantheism’. It develops by correcting and building upon the view Johnston attributes to Aquinas, of God as “‘Ipsum Esse’, that is Being or Existence Itself’. Johnston thinks Aquinas understands Existence Itself as ‘something like a Platonic *eidōs*’, and takes Tillich to ‘captur[e] the same thought’ more concretely with his claim that God is the Ground

of our Being (see p. 97). This identification of God with Existence Itself, Johnston says, fits the requirement that God's existence be *a se*. And God's aseity, Johnston thinks, gives rise to Aquinas's argument for divine simplicity: the Highest One is not dependent on anything else, so cannot be composite, since it would then depend on its parts and not be *a se*. God's existence, essence and essential attributes are thus one and the same. This paradoxical 'identity theory of God's nature', Johnston argues (following Plantinga), 'entails that God is a single property or attribute', and thus 'breaks all connection with the monotheistic faiths' (p. 103). Yet Aquinas emphasises that we apply predicates such as 'good' and 'exists' to God *analogically*. This doctrine of analogical divine predication is important, since, as Johnston says, 'it provides a semantic and cognitive framework for any positive thought about God' (p. 109). Johnston argues, however, that this doctrine clashes with the 'identity theory of God's nature' to which he thinks Thomas is committed: God's goodness, not his existence, is analogous to creaturely goodness; and God's existence, not his goodness, is analogous to creaturely existence; therefore, God's existence and God's goodness are *not* the same. Johnston concludes: 'if I have not distorted Thomas's intentions too much, we have here a profound flaw in Thomas's profound theology of Existence Itself' (p. 110).

But, arguably, Johnston *has* distorted Thomas's theology. So far from being inconsistent with it, the need for analogical predication may actually be entailed by divine simplicity! That is so, anyway, if divine simplicity (that is, along with other classical divine attributes) is understood *apophatically* – as affirming that God is *not* composite in the way in which a substance is 'composite' (through being the subject of attributes, and the instantiation of an essence). The message is that God is logically in a different category from beings and their properties, and *that* is why analogical use of predicates is needed for meaningful, though limited, knowledge of God.<sup>3</sup>

Johnston does nevertheless agree that God is not in the logical category of substance. For Johnston, God belongs to the category of *activity*. Rejecting divine simplicity – and atemporality and immutability along with it – Johnston proposes that the Highest One be identified with 'the outpouring of Existence Itself by way of its exemplification in

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<sup>3</sup> I am much indebted to Thomas Harvey (personal communication, and in conversation) for this perspective on Aquinas's doctrine of simplicity and its relation to his doctrine of divine analogical predication.

ordinary existents' (p. 113). The Highest One is thus, he says, 'a certain kind of activity that could be analogically described as Loving, for it is *the self-giving* outpouring of Existence Itself ...' (my emphasis, p. 113). He then specifies the purpose of this 'outpouring': 'The Highest One = the outpouring of Existence Itself by way of its exemplification in ordinary existents *for the sake of the self-disclosure of Existence Itself*' (my emphasis, p. 116). This account is panentheistic because it shows God to be 'wholly constituted by the natural realm[, but] ... numerically distinct ... by virtue of having this different form' (p. 127), that is, the form specified on the right hand side of the above identity. It is a *process* panentheism because the divine is not an abstract *eidos*, but concrete activity. And it is a *naturalist* theology because it accepts that the domain of the natural sciences is complete on its own terms: every causal transaction ultimately consists in some wholly natural process.

### Could loving God be 'affirming existence'?

Some will urge that taking God to be 'wholly constituted by the natural realm' is, by definition, pantheistic. While there's no point disputing over a term, the usual theist complaint about pantheism *is* salient – namely, mistaking the creative activity of the divine for the divine itself. Johnston holds *the outpouring* of Existence Itself to be divine: but won't that activity depend on its agent, and so Existence Itself be a fitter candidate for the Highest One? Or do we have here, uniquely, an activity that is ontologically prior to its agent?

What *is* 'Existence Itself', the supposed agent here? Presumably Johnston continues to use the term in the Platonic sense he (questionably) attributes to Aquinas. But, then, what is the difference between, say, a gnat's existing exemplifying Existence and Existence outpouring Itself in the exemplification which is the existing gnat? And how could the outpouring of Existence in the gnat – together with its outpouring in absolutely every ordinary existent throughout all time and space – be worthy of worship, and trustworthy for salvation from the 'large-scale existential defects' Johnston lists?

Johnston claims that the outpouring of Existence Itself 'seems well suited to command total affirmation by one's will', and adds that '[i]t is a process that makes up all of reality, and, arguably, to affirm this process and thoroughly identify with it is to truly love God' (p. 116). 'Affirming' and 'identifying with' existence seem to amount to *accepting* that what is, is. Such acceptance – especially when directed upon the awesome

vastness of the Universe as a whole – may in some shatter the selfishness of *homo incurvatus in se*, though equally, in others, it may generate feelings of meaninglessness and despair. After all, *every* ordinary existent will, on this view, be a manifestation of the divine outpouring, including the horrific sufferings of sentient animals. With such existents, it takes a stretch to ‘analogise’ Existence’s outpouring ‘as Loving’, or to give them ‘total affirmation by one’s will’. Certainly, it is a part of a theist’s orientation not to be ‘in denial’ about what is, including the reality of gratuitous suffering – but surely there is more to the ‘love of God’ than such acceptance?

### God’s goodness and the divine purpose

How, then, does God, understood as the outpouring of Being, count as good and powerfully able to save? Just before proposing that God is, not Existence Itself, but Existence’s *outpouring*, Johnston notes that ‘Aquinas explains the goodness of God as God’s being eminently desirable, desirable in a way that is more complete and coherent than the way in which any other object of desire could be desirable’. Thus, he adds, ‘God can be said (analogically, of course) to rightly command the total affirmation of his nature by our wills’ (p. 115). This does not fit, however, with attributing to Aquinas the Platonic view that God is Existence Itself – as Johnston himself remarks: ‘[h]ow could an unchanging *eidos* be maximally desirable?’ (p. 116) Rather, in this account of divine goodness, Aquinas seems to place God in the category of *ends* – which fits both with Aquinas’s view that God *is* his goodness, and with his counting as analogical and transcategorical the predication of ‘commanding’ to God. Johnston, however, does not follow this clue, choosing rather to amend the ‘Existence Itself’ account by emphasising its *activity*. Why that should yield something ‘maximally desirable’ is unclear, however: the outpouring of Existence *just happens*, it hardly makes sense to *desire* it (what we desire is that Existence should ‘outpour’ in certain ways rather than others).

Johnston’s conception of the Highest One does have a teleological element, however, and this may be, perhaps, the key to understanding Johnston’s account of divine goodness. For Johnston, the outpouring of Existence Itself *has a point*, namely *its own self-disclosure*, and, in particular, its self-disclosure *to us*. Johnston calls this the “‘doubly donatory” character of reality’ (p. 156): ‘First, I am an expression of Being Itself, ... Second, all of THIS is made available to me, gratis.’ (pp. 156-7)

If this account of the divine purpose seems too anthropocentric, we may allow (as I think Johnston would) that other sentient and cognising beings *also* receive Existence's disclosure. But disclosure to humanity is essential to the theist traditions: '... the Highest One,' Johnston says 'does not want us to be just *in* him, as elements in his reality; the Highest One wants us to be *with* him,' where 'being with him' amounts to 'participat[ing] in his own self-disclosure' (p. 116).

To understand our participation in the self-disclosure of the Highest One, Johnston maintains, we must reject 'representationalist' philosophy of mind as '... blindness to the gift, a profoundly impious theft, an attempt to appropriate to oneself the source of intelligibility' (pp. 127-8). Johnston summarises his positive view thus: 'All the manners of presentation or disclosure of things, all the ways of thinking of them, and experiencing them, *come with the things themselves*. What we call an individual consciousness is no more than a particular history of sampling from this vast realm, a history of accessing manners of presentation.' (my emphasis, p. 152) This 'vast realm' Johnston describes, following Frege, as 'the realm of sense,' 'the totality of objective modes of presentation,' or 'Objective Mind' (p. 154). Now, if our 'experience of presence' is a sampling from what is already *there*, Objective Mind must include inadequate and partial modes of presentation – otherwise illusory experience would, on this model, be impossible. Johnston grasps this nettle, accepting a hierarchy of modes of presentation, according to how accurate and complete they are. In the course of evolution, he thinks, minds first access primitive and limited modes of presentation, but gradually ascend to more adequate modes. '[A]t the idealized limit of deepening understanding,' he says, 'we would come to grasp those modes of presentation of reality that are fully adequate and complete, and so reveal the nature of what they present. In this sense, we would be conforming our minds to the Divine Mind, which may be construed as the totality of fully adequate and complete modes of presentation of reality.' (p. 155)

One may have more or less sympathy with Johnston's acknowledged Heideggerian theme here – namely, of the need to overcome 'a historic forgetfulness of Being-making-itself-present' (see pp. 128-9). But the contrast between minds as 'producers of presence' and as 'samplers of presence' seems a false one: consciousness depends, surely, *both* on the cogniser *and* on the object? And Johnston's idea that modes of presentation may constrain the evolution of conscious beings (see p. 154) seems suspect. The objective structure of modes of presentation



is surely counterfactual (that is, the existence of a particular mode is the existence of that which *would* appear thus and so to a certain sort of perceiver/cogniser suitably related to it). What objective modes of presentation there are, then, seems to depend conceptually on what forms of consciousness are possible, and that is determined by causal factors governing the development of the kinds of physical complexity from which consciousness can emerge.

A deeper concern arises from the need to connect Johnston's account of the purpose of the outpouring of Existence Itself with the Highest One's status as perfectly good, and powerful to save. Taking it to be self-disclosure may yield too passive and insufficiently practical an account of our participation in the divine purpose. And this account of the purpose seems too thin: 'sampling' modes of presentation, at least when they are accurate and complete, is a good, but it is not the whole of the good. As well, there is the problem of evil as it arises on Johnston's model. Some experiences of presence are experiences of serious suffering, but it is far from clear that they must, just for that reason, count as inadequate or incomplete, and so, disturbingly, there may not be anything on Johnston's account to prevent their belonging to the Divine Mind. Arguably, then, what Johnston takes the object of theistic worship to be, though it may be shorn of the idolatrous features of a supernatural God, is yet unfit to count as authentic divinity.

What appears missing from – or insufficiently accented in – Johnston's account, I suggest, is that divine self-disclosure needs to be *for the sake of revealing and achieving the Good*, and our participation in the divine needs to include our participation in that ethically supreme practical work. To qualify as the Highest One, then, the outpouring of Existence Itself would have to be ultimately for the sake of realising the Good, and enabling our participation in the Good through overcoming our fallenness and giving grounds for hope that commitment to the Good is indeed ultimately important. Furthermore, the Good must belong to the nature of the Highest One, otherwise its status as such is undermined by its seeking and serving what it itself lacks.

### **Conclusion: other options?**

In *Saving God* Johnston brilliantly brings the quest for authentic divinity into the heart of philosophical thinking about theism, demonstrating the importance of the epistemology of discriminating the gold of God-hood from the glister of idols. Whether Johnston hits gold with his own positive



account of divinity as the outpouring, self-disclosing, activity of Existence Itself in ordinary existents may be doubted, however. As I have in effect been suggesting, the worship of the outpouring of Existence may yet be an idolatry, albeit more pleasingly refined and austere than the idolatry of spiritual materialism that may beset personal omniGod theism.

Where should we look, then – those of us who agree that the supernatural omniGod, taken with metaphysical seriousness, is indeed an idol? There are some hints of alternatives to his ‘official’ position in Johnston’s discussion. Consider, for example, his urging those who ‘quest for meaning’ to ‘[l]ook instead to the self-disclosure of the Highest One as outpouring Life, Intelligibility and Love, and find your life-ordering demands there’ (p. 179). God as outpouring *Love*, I suggest, may connote more than the ‘self-giving’ of Existence Itself, found in all existents, which Johnston earlier (p. 113) describes as ‘Loving’, using what is surely a rather weak analogy. Can there be a ‘God is Love’ theology, further removed from pantheism than Johnston’s version of the theology of Being?

A further, related, alternative is to try to do fuller justice than Johnston does to the teleological aspects of theism. God may be the supreme Good itself, the ultimate *telos* of our existence, revealed as Love. If this account is to avoid reducing God to an abstract supreme ideal, it will need – somehow! – to explain how God, the Goal of existence, can also, as Creator, be the Source of all that is, and, furthermore, the Saving Enabler of our actually reaching the Goal.

There is, of course, an underlying issue to be considered: may idolatry be inherent in the very ambition to understand authentic divinity by completing an identity of the form, ‘The Highest One = ...’? Perhaps any claim intellectually to grasp the divine nature is *ipso facto* idolatrous? That thought motivates the view that our theology can only be negative, apophatic. But if a purely apophatic theology is unsatisfactory, and for reasons better than our ‘fallen’ desire to ‘get things clear’ on our own terms, there remains an important question about how non-hubristic understanding of the positive nature of the Highest One can be possible, and what general form it may properly take.