

# Saving God from "Saving God."

*Is traditional supernaturalism idolatrous?*

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## 1.

Princeton philosopher Mark Johnston was educated by Jesuits and briefly considered taking priestly orders before opting for a PhD in philosophy instead. He went on to make important contributions to several subfields of philosophy—metaphysics, ethics, philosophy of perception. But his work, like that of most analytic philosophers, has appeared mainly in professional journals, and is too technical for most of those outside the guild.

Johnston's *Saving God*, together with its sequel *Surviving Death*, marks a bold and very public return to the theological questions that he seemed to have left behind upon entering philosophy. It's not clear what roused him from his technical slumbers, though one gets a hint when *Saving God* begins with a deliciously dismissive critique of the "undergraduate atheisms" of Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, and company. It soon becomes clear, however, that Johnston is just as intent upon demolishing the traditional forms of religion targeted by these "New Atheists"; what they lack, he suggests, is sufficient philosophical firepower to carry out the job. They also lack the religious sensitivity to see that there might be a deeper truth in the traditional monotheisms that goes beyond their official creeds and dogmas.

In the second part of the book, Johnston draws on biblical and historical scholarship, ancient and modern theology, and philosophers as diverse as Saul Kripke, Martin Heidegger, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and René Girard, to present a positive case for what he regards as the "one true religion." This turns out to be a science-friendly panentheism according to which God is something like Being itself—or, more exactly, the lawfully ordered outpouring of Being into other lesser beings, not for their sakes but for the sake of its own self-disclosure. The "Highest One" Johnston describes is supposed to call for three distinctively religious responses from us:

(a) We must recognize it as such, seeing all of reality as exemplifying the properties of this Highest One, and seeing the latter as "loving" all things by making them existent and intelligible—all this despite the suffering and vulnerability that is essentially the lot of the sentient, organic beings among us.

(b) We should worship it as "the *absolute source* of reality."

(c) Such recognition and worshipful awe should motivate us to "overcome the centripetal force of the self, the condition of being *incurvatus in se*, and instead turn toward reality and the needs of others."

According to Johnston, only this sort of religion—with this kind of Being at its center—can overcome the true problem presented by evil and suffering, while also avoiding the idolatry of traditional supernaturalism and the bland scientism of undergraduate atheism.

Analytic philosophers are often accused of having a narrow and arid concern for clarity and rigor at the expense of something like "depth" or "relevance." This book gives the lie to that accusation: here is a leading member of the field drawing on diverse and unexpected resources (René Girard?!) to provide a clear but still "relevant" treatment of some of the "deepest" topics of all: Being, Becoming, God, Evil, Afterlife, Salvation, Perfect Love. In order to reach a broader-than-usual

audience, Johnston writes with much less technical rigor than one finds in his journal articles. Thus the book doesn't traffic in conceptual analyses and necessary-and-sufficient conditions; it is rather an impassioned plea—a self-described "jeremiad"—to revisit and reconceive certain elements of the tradition (Neo-Platonism, Thomism, process theology) on behalf of a naturalistic but still deeply religious alternative to the clashing monotheisms of today and the shrugging agnosticisms of tomorrow.

In spite of the poetic flourishes, there is a clear methodological structure to Johnston's reflections (a career's worth of philosophy is hard to abjure!). The method is akin to what is sometimes called "perfect being theology": First, define God as the most perfect possible being; then, argue about what attributes are perfections, or make for greatness; finally, arrive at a substantive thesis about what the most perfect being, God, is like (or would be like, if there were such a being). Although Johnston's "Highest One" is not *explicitly* characterized as the greatest possible being, he she or it is certainly intended to be—at the very least—the most perfect actual being, and some of the arguments (such as the one we consider in detail below) seem to assume that it is the greatest *possible* being too. As a result, the Highest One is supposed to satisfy familiar and largely negative constraints (such a being couldn't be dumb, couldn't act unreasonably, couldn't be cruel, and so forth). A further requirement is that it provide us with a means to battle our perverse (Johnston uses the term "fallen") inclinations.

## 2.

While Johnston's dismissal of the New Atheists is perfunctory, his attack on the "confused syncretism" of people working on the "problem of religious pluralism" is refreshingly honest. In the ecumenical spirit of "Why can't we all get along?", many theologians, politicians, pastors, and op-ed columnists seem to think that one can blithely identify the deities of the various monotheisms as just *obviously* "the same God"—despite the fact that different religions describe their deities in radically different ways. And yet, as Johnston succinctly puts it, there is the important "point of logic that at most one of these [deities] could be God."

It is tempting to regard the alternative model that Johnston is proposing as one on which there is a single Highest One and all religious attempts to picture that being are, in Johnston's own phrase, "incomplete, and partly occluding, visions" which may nonetheless offer some authentic approximations to a genuine "salvific core." That does at times seem to be what's on offer, as these quotations suggest. But elsewhere the gods of the three major monotheisms are simply said to be "not God" at all, and any attempt to see them as such, however well-motivated, is condemned as idolatrous.

These aren't strictly incompatible claims: perhaps what Johnston means when he says that Yahweh is "not God" is just that the biblical Yahweh *conceived with his full panoply of properties* is not the Highest One because the latter doesn't have most of those properties, even though Yahweh may still have been an effective presentation of the Highest One to a particular ancient Near Eastern culture. Still, there does seem to be a kind of tension here. Reading through the early parts of the book, one wants to ask: when people who practice one of the three Abrahamic religions talk about God in the terms of their respective traditions, and conceive of that God as the supreme or perfect being, do they succeed in *referring* to the Highest One or not? Again, there are passages that point in both directions, and others that suggest that Johnston wants to remain neutral: "either the gods of the three monotheisms are not God, or they are God, but seen only through a very, very dark glass." But is it then just a question of vagueness—sometimes religious folk manage to refer to the Highest One, even though the mode of presentation is very misleading, whereas other times the descriptive name under which they conceive of God leads to full-on reference failure? And does anything important hang on this? It seems like the charge of idolatry could be leveled either way.

In attempting to topple the idols of various historical religions, Johnston can sound surprisingly similar to Dawkins (see, for example, the latter's characterization of Yahweh as "the most unpleasant character in all fiction" in *The God Delusion*). Johnston trots out the genocidal and other unpleasant passages of the Torah, Psalms, and Prophets, and then declares that a deity worthy of devotion—a candidate for the office of Highest One—could not *really* behave in some of the ways described in these passages, or be driven by some of the ignoble motives apparently ascribed to him by their authors. The argument, then, is that our intuitions about what it would take to be a perfect being, worthy of worship, and so forth, disqualify any being with this kind of history.

This seems quite credible. But few traditional monotheists think that religious orthodoxy requires biblical literalism of this sort. Ibn Rushd and Maimonides, for instance, are joined by Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin—as well as Spinoza, Schleiermacher, and Bultmann—in arguing that while the Bible does provide us with some information about God, it was also clearly written by different human beings in particular cultures and contexts, and as a result requires a great deal of interpretation and revisionary qualification. Johnston is aware of this, and even cites Maimonides in places, but through much of the relevant chapter he appears to follow the undergraduate atheists in moving from a rejection of biblical *literalism* to a rejection of biblical *theism* altogether. And that's a non sequitur than which few greater can be conceived.

As far as serious critique goes, it seems that the only real barrier between Johnston and his youthful religion is his deep opposition to supernaturalism—that prescientific brew of beliefs in miracles, in a personal God who could, in principle, answer prayer, and in the life to come, complete with rewards and punishments. Such a brew is what leads to "idolatry"—i.e., the attempt to manipulate God, to serve God but only for our own selfish ends, and thereby to avoid the transformation that true *agape* would require. But even though petitionary prayer and belief in a coming kingdom may devolve into these kinds of inappropriate responses to God, especially in the hands of corrupt television preachers and snake-oil merchants, few serious adherents of the major monotheisms believe they can get whatever they want from God, or enter deeply into their faith tradition for *purely* selfish reasons. On the other hand, merely asking God for good things—healing for oneself and others, for example, or simple "daily bread"—is not *ipso facto* selfish or manipulative. Of course, if God were a cosmic vending machine and we had an unlimited supply of coins, it might be hard not to treat God as a means to our ends. But few religious folk reasonably believe that divine love entails a willingness to indulge our every whim.

### 3.

So much for Johnston's twofold critique of undergraduate atheism and idolatrous theism. What about his own panentheistic alternative? The main argument for this view—that the Highest One is constitutive of creation, rather than separate from it—is brief and elegant but also, as far as we can tell, hard to regard as sound. It comes in the form of a *reductio*: Consider the traditional picture according to which a separate creation "reflects" the perfections of the Highest One (God) but is not constituted by or a part of that Being. That means, says Johnston, that creatures themselves have some limited share in perfection—rocks and brains and puppies are all good in different ways. And that in turn means that the "joint reality made up of the Highest One and the separate creation" would be *more* perfect and thus more "worthy of worship and fealty" than the Highest One all by itself. In other words, the "joint reality" would be higher than the Highest One. That is impossible, of course, so we must reject the traditional picture and concede that "there is no separate creation."

There are a number of things to say here by way of response. First, it doesn't seem at all obvious that the "joint reality" in question would be an appropriate object of worship and fealty. A person plus a rock—even a very shiny, valuable rock—is not a proper object of fealty or love, even if the person is. Further, in the traditional picture, part of the joint reality is a *creature* produced by God, and consideration of this fact alone may be enough to defeat the suggestion that a "joint reality" made up of that creature plus God would be more perfect and thus more worthy of *worship*. For it seems plausible, especially in light of Johnston's other probing reflections on idolatry, that only *uncreated* things are worthy of worship, even if created things that reflect and express the Creator in various ways are worthy of something like *admiration* or *respect*. Indeed, Johnston appears to suggest as much when he says, later on, that the reason God "deserves our worship" is that "He is the *absolute source of reality*." But by this criterion, combining God and his creation into a joint reality doesn't give us something that is *more* worship-worthy than God on his own, since the creaturely part of that whole is not an absolute source of reality and also contributes nothing to making the joint reality such an absolute source. Instead we end up with a joint reality only *part* of which is an absolute source and thus worship-worthy, and that seems arguably worse (or less High) than a being *all* of whom is worship-worthy. In short, the fact that there are additional good-making features in the "joint reality" does not, all by itself, make it a "competitor for the name of the Highest One" or more worthy of "worship, fealty, and love" than the traditional deity.

Second, recall that the classical God is supposed to be supremely perfect: infinitely good and wise and strong and so forth.

This suggests that finite creatures, even if they do have good-making features that "reflect" or "participate" in God's perfections, don't ultimately add any goodness to the universe. For the universe already contains infinite goodness, and so the joint reality that includes both God and creatures won't be any better than God alone. Perhaps this could be the basis for an argument against the traditional picture and in favor of the pantheist one, since even traditional theists have the intuitive sense that creation increases the overall goodness of the universe. But this may be the same intuitive sense that leads us to think, erroneously, that adding 10 billion units to an infinite number of units increases the overall number of units. Recognition of this point is precisely why a traditionalist like Richard Swinburne argues that creation must be an absolutely free act: God was not making the world any better by creating, and so he was free to choose not to, even though (thankfully) he did.

Third and finally: if the joint reality includes some *bad* stuff, adding it to another proper part that is *very good* will yield a worse whole than just taking the very good part on its own (here we are setting aside the case of an infinitely good part and a bad part that is not infinitely bad). But our world, though full of goodness, also includes some very bad stuff, at least for sentient creatures. If the basic line of thought in Johnston's argument is correct, shouldn't we conclude that the Highest One is just the sum of all the *good* stuff? But then the result would not be panentheism after all.

#### 4.

In response to this series of objections, Johnston might simply point us to his preface. There he says that he is not aiming the book at philosophers and that it is not meant to contain philosophical arguments. Fair enough, though one might protest that Johnston is the Walter Cerf Professor at a top-flight philosophy department, and so it doesn't seem completely outrageous to approach his book with a philosopher's eye for arguments. Johnston's goal is explicitly to persuade, rather than prove, by articulating a kind of religious vision and hoping to catch the eyes of people with a receptive, spiritual sensibility. His eloquent reflections on the outpouring love of the Highest One are quite compelling in this regard. He is also skilled at retrieving what he takes to be of value in the supernaturalist positions: his own vision—of the "self-giving outpouring of Existence Itself by way of its exemplification in existents"—is an explicit analogue of the Christian doctrine of God's kenotic, agapic Love. Finally, he articulates an ethical position that is much more demanding than that of most contemporary religious folk, one according to which total selflessness and agapic emulation of the Highest One is the regulative ideal.

The ethical position is clearly very admirable, but the attempt to ground it in an analogy between the self-outpouring of the Highest One and ideal agapic love seems problematic to us. For, first, one might think that self-giving Love has to make itself truly vulnerable to another: be willing to suffer in the beloved's sufferings and take joy in the beloved's joys. It is hard to see how this fits with the pantheistic picture. (Is it that God is constitutive of us, in some sense, and so in that very fundamental way "shares" in our sufferings and joys?)

Second, self-giving Love seems to be essentially other-directed: that is, a *numerically* distinct recipient seems to be required in order for a self truly to give. But the love of Johnston's Highest One is a love without a numerically distinct object. When someone's heart pours (or pumps) blood to his feet and hands—items that are ultimately still a part of him—does he count as "giving" in any important sense? True, he gives "of" himself (i.e., it is *his* blood that is given) and is in that sense self-giving. But the recipient is also, well, *himself* (or part of himself) rather than another, and that seems to make him—with respect to this donation at least—far less impressive a giver or lover than someone who donates blood to someone *else*.

Johnston says that the Highest One's essential nature is that of "outpouring and self-disclosure ... for the purpose of the self-disclosure of Existence itself," and that this "is something we can recognize as the ideal prototype of our highest ideal of love." But again: is this really the *highest* ideal? We are clearly trading in analogies here, but, still, a view of love that idealizes self-disclosure and self-giving in this way seems awfully onanistic. There is a long tradition of thinking of creation along these lines, starting with the Egyptian creation myth according to which Amon-Ra generated the entire universe through one stupendous act of masturbation. But surely this is one of those idolatrous supernaturalisms that Johnston

wanted to banish!

Consider by comparison a view on which love creates and sustains something genuinely other, and then seeks to woo it back into a kind of union that, notwithstanding, does not completely elide that otherness. In this picture, ordinary beings like us become recipients of a gift that is truly given *away*, rather than outpoured modes of a Spinozistic attribute, beloved by God merely in virtue of being "potential sites of God's self-disclosure."

## 5.

Despite the many interesting arguments and proposals in *Saving God*, then, the book seems to stumble with respect to its two chief aims. Johnston does not produce arguments that seriously undermine the possibility of the sort of God posited by the most sophisticated theological traditions within the Abrahamic faiths. Adherents of these religions must certainly grapple with the various versions of the problem of evil, but they have little to fear from Johnston's specific objections. Moreover, his own candidate for the "Highest One" has a very dubious claim to the title. It is not, or not obviously, as perfect and worship-worthy as an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly benevolent personal creator.

Finally, the Highest One seems to have trouble performing the redemptive role that Johnston assigns to it. It is supposed to be able to strengthen us, providing grace "from outside" to fight the war against our inward-curving nature and thereby moving us toward *agape*—at least, it is supposed to be able to do this once we have grasped its nature and gotten on its side. But while Johnston is certainly right that we are flawed or "fallen" creatures who ought to strive for agapic transformation but lack the resources to make more than feeble efforts in that direction, it's not clear how understanding his view of the God that is worth saving is supposed, in turn, to save us. In other words, it's not clear that Existence's outpouring into innumerable "self-disclosures" that we can perceive, in ourselves and throughout the universe, really makes the world a better place. (What if the disclosures are from the pain family?) It's also not clear why we should be grateful to Existence for having hit upon this particular metaphysical scheme.

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