# THEOLOGY

*A Thematic Compilation*

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# Abstract

***Theology*** is about God and Creation, or more precisely perhaps about our ideas of them, how they are formed and somewhat justified, although it is stressed that they can be neither proved nor disproved.

This book is a thematic compilation drawn from past works[1] by the author over a period of thirteen years (1995-2009). It was expanded in 2014 (with an old essay), and again in 2022 (with a new essay).

[1] Note: Some chapters have been merged here. Also, some chapters have been split up into smaller sections.

# Foreword

Some readers may find my occasional references to God in some of my works as misplaced. In this day and age, any reference to God is considered by many as necessarily apologetic and prejudiced. But I insist, my works are *secular and rational works of philosophy*. I simply refuse to be intimidated by ignorant pseudo-philosophers, who tell the masses that atheism is an established fact of 'science'. I consider myself a philosopher in the ancient and high tradition, which admits of no such fashionable dogma.

In this context, *theology* is admitted as a legitimate and noble field of open philosophical debate, in which theism and atheism are both given voice and must both argue their case rationally, though both may remain forever equally speculative. In my view, people who claim that atheism is scientific are as epistemologically pretentious as those who claim knowledge of the Divine by ordinary experience and reasoning. The role of philosophy here is merely to eliminate certain incoherent ideas, and so limit the field to a more limited number of respectable ones. Beyond that, all beliefs (including the atheistic) are personal faiths.

# Contents

# 1. CHAPTER ONE

Drawn from *Judaic Logic* (1995),
Chapters 2:4 (part) and 14:1-2;
and Addenda 10 and 11.

# LOGICAL ASPECTS OF FAITH

## 1. Logic and mysticism

One of the difficulties in religious thinking is its categorical expressions of knowledge.

There exists a tendency, in the human mind, to confuse conceptual insight with perception, and view them as having the same degree of probability. However, whereas perception (and its derivatives, which we term 'empirical fact') has a rather high level of credibility (rarely is what we perceive, as such, in an as near as possible unprocessed form, found incorrect), conceptual consciousness has broader possibilities, as it includes the imaginary, which

allows us to propose alternative scenarios, and therefore relatively less credibility, *ab initio.*

For the simple mind, which has not reflected on epistemological issues, the mere event of thinking of a conceptual scenario in answer to some query, is sufficient in itself to justify that scenario. No further evidence is needed, no checking procedure. Of course, this is an extreme case. A person practicing this approach to knowledge full time, would be most likely in a nuthouse, I presume. Rather, we all practice such shortcuts to knowledge, though to varying degrees, and in some cases in different domains.

The danger here, is to confuse *speculation* with knowledge in its finished state.

Every insight or belief is strictly-speaking a speculation, which may be right or may be wrong. After proper evaluation, which is itself to some extent speculative, we may be closer to the truth, and may with more confidence declare it to be right or wrong. Such evaluation consists in examining the perceptual and conceptual context, all known fact and insight, and judging its consistency with the proposed newcomer, the thesis under scrutiny, and considering the mutual impact of these blocks of information. Furthermore, the context is in non-stop flux, so that the evaluation must constantly proceed and recur, to remain accurate. Only thus can we be reasonably sure.

In the early stages of human development, whether historical or individual, we tend to be less careful in our

evaluations of knowledge. More maturely, we must regard our alleged knowledge more critically and fairly, without prejudice one way or the other, more objectively and freely. If we fail to, we in the long run must needs succumb to doubt, the structure is bound to seem shaky eventually. If it is strong, it will withstand all tests; if it is weak, it might be strengthened, or else does not deserve respect. This is a challenge religion, too, must face, to survive.

Logic has no *in principle* objection to mysticism. It has no prejudice with regard to the eventual *content* of the world. What concerns logic is *the morphology and aetiology of our knowledge*, the forms and processes which gave rise to it. With regard to mysticism (the "Qabalah"), it would seem to constitute an attempt to conceive scenarios - which are speculations, at first sight, as far as logic is concerned - to explain certain phenomena or texts. Since the questions posed concern domains inaccessible to scientific investigation, the answers are, ultimately, inherently *unverifiable*, although some degree of confirmation, doubt, improvement or rejection may be possible.

In other words, there are propositions which are not likely to ever be proved right, or wrong, which may even be impossible to evaluate convincingly. They concern God, the Beginning of things, the End of days, and so on. They are beyond Man's mind, because they are out of his mental reach or outside of his universe. Anything said about them, positive or negative, is purely speculative, from a normal

human point of view. Even what is claimed Divinely inspired, though it may well indeed be so in reality, is viewed by logic as speculative; since *we*, ordinary people, when we hear such claims, are forced to consider the possibility that the speaker may not have been inspired, for instance. It is a stand-off.

We must neither reject offhand, nor be naive, but must do as much evaluation as possible, and still remain open at the end. This is to some extent implied by the Biblical laws of adduction. The fact that these laws are found in the Torah, testifies to the need for a certain degree of empiricism and exercise of the critical faculty. It is an admission that men (or women), by their nature, may confuse their imaginations and speculations with reality, and often come forth with unfounded claims of Divine inspiration. We are called upon to judge carefully.

Even within religion, if not especially in that realm, people can very easily err, and tend to accept the offerings of their conceptual faculty at face value. Which does not mean, let us make clear, that such error is inevitably or even usually implied within religion.

## 2. On natural proofs of religion

In discussing the logic in religious documents like the Bible or Talmud, we have had no occasion to consider what philosophers call “proofs of God”. The reason is

simple: the pursuit of such proofs is not a religious phenomenon, at least not originally, but a concern of secular philosophy (specifically, the branch called theology). The Torah's proofs of God are implied in the epiphanies and acts of God that it reports, like His appearance to Moses in the Burning Bush or His division of the Red Sea. When the prophets argue on God's behalf, they do not use abstract philosophy, but refer to Biblical events which are taken for granted. Similarly, the Talmud takes off from the Biblical document without critically questioning its origin or contents. Nevertheless, nowadays theological discussions inevitably linger on natural proofs of religion. The modern mind requires it.

It must be said at the outset that there are no unassailable proofs of Judaism's beliefs; nor are there disproofs. Every known argument, one way or the other, has a rebuttal. Unless we are each personally and constantly in the Presence of God, we are bound to have to rely on *faith*; and lacking such experience, our reason also cannot with certainty deny its Object. The main characteristics we attribute to God in our thinking, our 'definition' of him as Existent, Unitary, Unique, Omnipresent, Omniscient, Omnipotent, Creator and Master of everything, perfectly just and merciful Judge, providential and gracious, and so forth, are all intellectual and emotional projections (constructions largely based on Torah data, to be sure), which ultimately depend on acts of faith.

These comments apply equally to Christianity, Islam, and other monotheistic religions. As for systems like Hinduism, Taoism or Buddhism, they too contain unprovable and undisprovable beliefs, like the idea of karma or the notion that liberation is possible (by means like meditation or whatever). In every religion, there are certain starting points, which one may choose to accept or refuse; logic becomes used in them only as from those points of departure.

Consider, first, the most natural of arguments in favor of belief in God. Looking around one at the world, one is bound to marvel at the miracle of ***existence***, at the fact that *anything at all* exists, and furthermore at the degree of ***variety, order and complexity*** of what exists, not to mention the wonder of ***our consciousness of all that***. This general miracle, which seen daily passes unnoticed, is surely more impressive than any particular miracle, like the Splitting of the Red Sea. Where did all this come from? It could not always have been there! Who made it happen? It is too fancy to have happened "by chance" and "*ex nihilo*" (even supposing the concepts of chance and nothingness at all meaningful)! Thinking thus, one may easily infer: yes! There must be a God, powerful and

conscious to a very high degree, who created all this, the miracle of Nature.[2]

However, convincing as this argument may seem[3], it is easily rebutted. For we can similarly argue that if this universe we experience is a marvelous thing, *how much more* marvelous is an Entity capable of creating it! Our initial argument posited God as an explanation of the surprising phenomenon before us; but upon reflection we must admit that we have thereby given ourselves an even more complicated problem to solve[4]. We could therefore

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[2] This sort of intellectual pursuit of the First Cause, is found in Greek philosophy. One Talmudic version is the story in Midrash *Genesis Rabbah* (ch. 38), according to which the patriarch Abraham arrived to a knowledge of God by reasoning backwards from each thing to its cause. The argument has often, in philosophy, been understood as based on the idea that everything has a cause, therefore so must the universe have one; but such an idea is consistent only if we accept that of infinite series, which is rather difficult to accept, and which in any case if accepted would exclude acceptance of a first cause. The version more commonly found today appeals rather to the need to explain the improbable *fact* and *richness* of existence; it refers to complexity as much as to causality.

[3] And I can testify that there have been times in my life when this has been the only convincing argument I had left to offer myself!

[4] As for the belief, found in Hinduism and Christianity, that God has appeared in human form (incarnation), it does not merely present a more difficult technical problem; it is rather an unconscionable concept: how can a container contain itself? If at all, such appearance would have to be postulated as a projected illusion, a sort of holograph, at best; it cannot be proposed as a ‘real’ material body like that of human beings.

argue: **if the world requires explanation, how much more so God; and if God requires no explanation, how much less so the world**. In brief, our intervention has only been briefly satisfying; the initial problem remains essentially unsolved; if we achieved anything, it was to complicate matters further.

Thus, whether we refer to the existence as such of the world as a whole (positing a cosmological argument) or to the variety, order and complexity of its parts (a teleological argument), the logical impact of such ontological arguments is identical - nil. We may through such reasoning make the interesting discovery that matter may have been created *ex nihilo* by a spiritual Being, but that does not provide us with a *final* explanation of things. The existence and power of the Creator remain a formidable mystery[5]. In any case, note well, such

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[5] Note that the argument is often misconstrued as an attempt to explain matter. But it is not so, essentially; for the mind (consisting of the stuff of our inner experiences and the soul we seem to have) is just as fascinating an enigma, if not more so. The problem is more broadly: *existence*. In this perspective, we may say that Judaism, which conceives of an eternal spiritual God, preceding and outlasting all matter, and Aristotle, who conceives of an everlasting universe, including God and matter, are basically in agreement with regard to the eternity of existence as such (for the former, with regard to God's existence only; for the latter, more broadly). This is ironic, considering how some commentators present these doctrines as in radical conflict; they are in disagreement, but only in relation to the issue of matter's longevity. A truly radical counter-thesis is the claim that existence suddenly appeared

neutralization of the argument does not prove anything against the idea of God; it merely signifies that the proposed course of reasoning is not logically conclusive.

An alternative philosophical approach to the issue, is epistemological rather than ontological. We may ask the question: what *would* in principle constitute definite proof for or against each of the tenets of religion; what would it take to convince us firmly? For instance, with regard to the existence of God, one might assume that some manifestation of Divinity, such as a great light or a very unnatural occurrence, would firmly convince any empiricist.

However, it is conceivable that even under such conditions, once the surprise is over and one has had a chance to think again, one may even doubt one's vision! Normally, we do not doubt any experience unless we have cause to, due to some conflicting experience; however, the intellect is always capable of skepticism and might be able to find some excuse for it even under the conditions stated[6]. We may consider this scenario as acceptable to the

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spontaneously out of non-existence; some people apparently believe that. But the way the latter thesis is 'imaginable' should be noted: we visualize the event like a cartoon on TV, the screen is at first empty, then 'pop!' a universe appears from nowhere; however, there is a screen to begin with, and there may be invisible events behind the screen.

[6] Hypotheses circulated in recent years to explain the Sinai experience include, for instances, references to

Torah, since we know from within it that even after witnessing extraordinary events such as the Exodus from Egypt or the Giving of the Torah at Sinai, there were individuals who evidently, as their deeds demonstrate, had doubts concerning the reality or significance of these events.

With regard to the characteristics of God we have mentioned, other than Existence, the following comments may be made. Most of these concepts encapsulate some logical perplexity. How may God have many attributes and powers and yet be one? Some, like Maimonides, try to bypass the issue, by saying, His oneness is something different from the unity of any thing in the natural world, it is unique; or, by claiming (contrary to the Torah's practice) that we can only describe God by means of negative propositions, saying what He is not (not plural, not finite, etc.). But these are artifices, which do not really resolve the paradoxes. God as both transcendent and immanent, the uncreated creator and unmoved mover of everything, all-knowing with an inner and outer perspective, all-powerful with unsurpassable control of events - all these concepts are *extrapolations of natural powers and events to an extreme degree*, but we have no experience of them nor capacity for it.

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psychotropic substances, or technological gadgets, or visiting extraterrestrials.

How can a human, not him/her self knowing everything, *know* that God knows everything; how can a human, in whose experience all powers are finite, *know* of an agent of will capable of doing anything it wants? At best, what is involved is a Walt Disney imagination, without attention to detail. The definitions of such limitless concepts are unavoidably *mere juggling of words*, they refer to nothing we have real knowledge of. Indeed, the concepts are *fraught with logical problems*. Can an omniscient being conceivably know that he is omniscient? he can only assume it, for there may well be something beyond his ken he is not aware of[7]. Does omnipotence include the capacity for self-creation ex-nihilo? the idea is unconscionable. How are we to conceive God as being everywhere, the being and sustainer of being of all material, mental and spiritual existents, the container of the whole universe, and yet somehow not get into pantheism, as did Spinoza?

And so forth - my purpose is not here to exhaust the issues, or cause loss of faith, but merely to point out that any attempt to rationalize our standard ideas about God is a display of naivety. Better to humbly acknowledge the difficulties involved and our reliance on faith.

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[7] Of course, *by definition* (deductively) an in-fact omniscient being knows his omniscience. But the problem is at the inductive level, gradual development. More needs to be said on this and similar issues.

To conclude this topic, then, we must say that reason can order and make consistent our thoughts concerning God and other religious beliefs, but it can never definitely prove them. It is vain to seek actual proof. There is no escape from the necessity of *emunah*, faith. Faith is essential to freedom of will and moral responsibility: if the moral act is done under the compulsion, as it were, of mere logic, the human being loses his special status as decider. To say this, is not to provide a sort of transcendental proof of religion - but is merely an explanatory perspective, proposed from within religion, after its acceptance. The undecided are not logically compelled by it, but are still free to choose for themselves whether **to believe or not to believe**.

Furthermore, it must be noted that proof of God would in no way entail proof of the rest of religion. Given that God exists, there still remains the issue as to *which religious document, if any,* is to be relied on as God's message to us. Is it to be the Torah, the Gospels, or the Koran, or the Baghavad-Gita, for that matter? An additional act of faith is required here too! Furthermore, granting the choice of the Written Torah as a whole (in our case)[8], a *multitude* of

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[8] Which is not an easy feat, in view of its lack of system (why would God's historic statement to humanity be so disorderly, so 'unprepared'?); and the many apparent inaccuracies and inconsistencies in it (those noted by the Rabbis, and those ignored by them); not to mention the disproportionately large place given to apparently minor matters, while major issues are glossed over or totally ignored.

additional acts of faith are required to believe in the Oral Law (the Talmud and subsequent Rabbinic developments). *Every* law, attitude and story in the Bible and subsequent religious literature, is a complex of separate beliefs, requiring a new act of faith. Washing the hands in the morning, the *nidah* going to the *mikveh*, as much as belief in invisible entities (like angels), acts (like Divine judgment) and domains (like the World-to-come) are bundles of acts of faith.

The demand for proof of God becomes, in this perspective, merely the beginning of an infinite process. If we awaited the answers, refusing faith, we would never find the time to enter religion...

## 3. Theodicy and the Believer's Wager

In any case, in practice (we must keep insisting on this point), people do not become religious on account of rationalistic arguments, but for more visceral motives. Good philosophy tries to abstain from extreme rationalism, and while it tends to frown on confused anarchism, it is open to considerable speculation and intuition. But religion allows the irrationalism in us, our instinctive deeper yearnings and emotional responses,

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But a critique of the Torah is not in order, here: the present work takes it, as much as possible, as the point of departure.

greater freedom. This is, I think, its human dimension; it makes us more than machines.

To be sure, the extremes of religion, 'fundamentalism', or more precisely 'integrism'[9], are to a large extent products of an excessive rationalism (in a pejorative sense of the term - it is the rationalism of simpletons), which explains the severity they have historically very often implied (their expressions, particularly the violence, are of course irrational).

What makes people religious in practice are banal things like hope for happiness on earth (which is gradually transmuted into hope for life in a thereafter), hope for better human relationships, hope for understanding, love, harmony, a woman or man, children; also, the release from

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[9] *L'integrisme*, a French word which seems to be becoming English. It is handy because it describes the total empire religion may have on its adherents, dragging them into ever more demanding commitment. Its connotation is, however, especially political; the terrorist tactics of various Islamic fanatics or absolute theocracy of Iranian *ayatollahs* (clergy), which we currently witness daily in the news, sadly come to mind. The term is still accurate in this context, suggesting totalitarianism, the desire of some to have *everyone* else follow their path and to control *all* aspects of their lives. 'Fundamentalism' rather indicates the level of *text* the adherents refer to for their beliefs; i.e. a certain naive and superficial approach to textual exegesis. Behind the intolerance, which is also to be found to some extent in today's Jewish world, is the severity towards self seemingly demanded by religion (and other puritanisms): this is what causes us to look at others with hardness.

fears, protection from the hardships of life, and of death, release from guilt and from uncertainty, absolution and guidance. (These are very broad brushstrokes, but you know what I mean.) Religion makes promises and threatens, capturing ready victims and then spinning an ever tighter web around them, with expert moves and the help of its victims themselves (these words may sound harsh, disillusioned; but this is a view, which has some truth). Religion has psychology, it knows what moves people.

The human being has his or her own intuition of justice. It is not in all people identical nor of equal intensity, but it is the source of their ability to at all grasp the concept. This personal intuition of justice may be influenced, one way or another, by religious or other doctrines - cultural influences may cause a rationalistic or even forcible reconstruction of the instinct in an individual - but epistemologically it precedes them and antecedes them. The concept of justice, then, is in all individuals the result of a compromise between personal insight and socio-cultural pressures, whose power over the individual depends on the particular combination of desires, fears and guilts which at a given time determine his or her susceptibility.

All this has apparently little to do with God, but rather more to do with psychology and sociology! But in truth, since religion takes up so firmly the idea of God, we tend to associate the two, and usually think distancing

ourselves from the former necessitates distancing ourselves from the latter. Belief in God is theologically conceivable without belief in a religion; many people have tried to opt for this middle ground. But in practice the link is rather strong. Resistance to religion arises to the extent that, or as of when, the promises or threats it makes are regarded as empirically untenable.

What is it we expect from God when we ask him for justice and mercy? *Justice*: that we and our loved ones be rewarded for our good deeds and that our enemies be punished for their bad deeds and be deprived of graceful gifts. *Mercy*: that we and our loved ones be given gifts of grace and be forgiven for our bad deeds. When our hearts feel generous, we understand that God may reward good deeds of our enemies and occasionally forgive their bad deeds. All this is a basic instinct of humans. On this basis we may pray for our protection, our sustenance, our happiness, and so forth.

Of course, the concepts involved in such general or specific prayers are complex. There are many aspects, levels and degrees to them.

Good and bad may be spiritual, mental, physical, emotional - or political, social, economic or environmental or even esthetic; and may be so to various degrees, directly or indirectly, and categorically or conditionally. One may cause good or bad to God’s designs, or to oneself, to other people (individually, in groups or as a species), or even to animals or vegetation (individually, in groups or as

species)[10]. Furthermore, there may be harmonies and conflicts between all these domains - they impinge on each other, naturally and logically, in various ways, and hierarchies must be set up or identified. Additionally, our perceptions come into play: the objective status of a value or disvalue is often moot or irrelevant, and our subjective intuitions of them may have more impact.

Likewise, friends and enemies may be real or imagined. These notions basically refer to the benefit or harm other people cause us (in the various ways just mentioned). But motives and emotions are involved in such evaluations: issues of love, hatred or indifference, sincerity or insincerity, on both sides. There are friends or enemies in fact (by virtue of objective impact) and those of intention

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[10] With regard to the mineral world, the issue is debatable. We ordinarily consider concepts of good or bad as applicable to such objects only in relation to living creatures, or eventually to God. One might however say, more absolutely, that the destruction of even a stone, is "bad" for it, or that a gem or a work of art or a technological marvel has an intrinsic "value" as an apogee of the universe. But within such a notion, there would be no degrees or conditions. The good of a thing would be its unchanged existence; bad for it would be any modification in its being, at which point it would be *another* thing, which in turn would have only either-or value-relations to events. As for God, Whom we conceive as indestructible, and even unchanging (although a Free Agent of change), the concepts of good or bad are inapplicable to Him personally; at most we can say that whatever He wills is good, and whatever He wants us (to whom He has allotted some measure of choice) to will - is good, and not-to-will - is bad.

(referring to whether they affect us one way or the other deliberately, incidentally or by accident).

We assume and hope God, the Judge and Arbitrator, sorts all these factors out, and delivers and enforces a fair decision.

Appeal to God presupposes a belief in good and bad. Zen will say that good and bad are linked, and its adepts try to see the world neutrally, without such dualist concept. It is true that the *thought* of good automatically gives rise to the *thought* of bad - or at least, absence of good - by way of *outline and contrast*. Logically, the concepts can be grounded in relation to a standard of value, which merely 'passes the buck' to some arbitrary norm, unless universal values can be identified. But actually, within human beings, these concepts, good and bad, are very difficult to pinpoint; they are vague, variable, and often inconsistent. It is more in the way of an instinct, or at best an intuition of appearance, that we conceive good or bad to apply to something. This is one of the peaks of our conceptual faculty, this discerning of the unwordable, but no less valuable than sense perception. It is the dignity and decency of humans.

In relation to God, what humans seek, and what makes them enter and practice religion, is a set of rules to the game of life, which, if they adhere to them and perform certain things (in the largest sense), it will be well with them as they wish; and if they do not, they may expect

negative consequences. It is *a deal* we want to believe in, and are willing to pay for (whether or not we admit our mercantilism). It is a rationalist demand for a comprehensible world in which good and bad are each put in its place. Religion comes along and promises just that, an orderly causality (this is in the case of theist religions - in the case of religions like Taoism and Buddhism the offer is different, an escape by transcendence from the good-bad dichotomy). One accepts the doctrine hopefully, and *tries to perceive the world in the prescribed way* so as to obtain solace.

Difficulty may arise after a long apprenticeship, when one finds that the rules we were promised do not hold, and the sequences of good and bad in our lives, whatever they be for each individual, do not necessarily adhere to the promised program[11]. At this point, religion proposes transcendental domains - heaven and hell[12]. A perception of events contrary to the expectations raised by the religion, together with a conviction of having played the game by the rules, may cause a breakdown of faith and the abandonment of religion, or parts thereof. But a vacuum

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[11] In this context, it is worth quoting George Santayana (d. 1952): "Fanaticism is described as redoubling your effort when you have forgotten your aim". It is clear that not everyone reevaluates their ideological loyalties.

[12] Incidentally, the idea of hell is said to have originated in Zoroastrianism, a dualist religion of the 6th cent. BCE which still has adherents. See Roberts, p. 169.

remains, if the world continues to seem irrational - a need for fair-play unfulfilled.

The *Believer's Wager*[13] is that God exists, and that his or her particular choice of Religion (or even his/her personally designed religion, or variant of an established Religion) is the correct one for himself or herself. It is a wager, because the refusal to make a leap of faith, is itself a leap of faith, into something which must be evaluated too:

- What if my religion is **true**, and I abstain from following it - will I get hurt and/or will I miss goodies?
- And what if my religion is **false**, and I do follow it - will I mess up my life and/or will I waste it?
- What of **other** belief-systems on the market - how do they compare, in terms of credibility and efficacy?

There is a wide-ranging calculus in the decision, which may be referred to as the essence of *theodicy*, but ultimately *some* leap of faith remains unavoidable, in whatever direction it be.

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[13] This is called *Pascal's Wager* in histories of philosophy; but since I thought of it independently and I am sure others have, and a more descriptive name seemed worthwhile, I have renamed it.

## 4. Proof of God by analogy?

I heard Geneva's Rabbi Marc Raphaël Guedj recently argue, in a sermon, that "just as Man's soul sees but is not seen, so God sees but is not seen". I have seen a similar argument in Rabbinic literature before, or perhaps it was the simpler proposition that God is to the world what the body is to the soul[14]. This is of course an argument *by analogy*. However, it should be noted that the analogy is *imperfect*, since we regard God as creating the universe whereas we do not regard Man's soul as creating his body[15].

In any case, we see from the above objection that, as I have always argued, though analogy is not in itself erroneous, it is rarely if ever conclusive. The analogy admittedly carries some conviction, but this must be weighed against the points of difference. There are always differences—otherwise the things compared would not be two but one! The issue is to estimate the significance of the differences. In the above case, as all will admit, our concepts of God and Man do not merely differ in scale.

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[14] Which argument is, incidentally, found in Indian philosophy, specifically in Ramajuna (1100 CE). (See Ferm, p. 15.)

[15] And in fact I doubt that the view that God is in a similar relation to the world as Man's soul is to his body is strictly kosher; it could be interpreted as a sort of pantheism, which the Rabbis dislike.

Also, before we try to infer God from Man, we must more deeply consider whether our concept of Man is knowledge or theory. We (myself included) assume that Man has a 'soul' on the basis of the fact of consciousness: phenomena do not just manifest themselves, but they seem to appear *to* someone—a Subject seems logically required, which experiences things. Nevertheless, many people (in particular, Buddhists) deny this inference, and emphasize the transparency of the 'soul', its lack of concrete manifestations, to conclude that the existence of the 'soul' is an illusion.

Furthermore, solipsism remains a philosophical possibility (though not one I personally incline towards). I, the Subject, perceive some things closest to my apparent center of perception, which things I call 'my body'; and I perceive (more wholly, though less intimately) other bodies beyond mine, which resemble mine and behave like mine; and from that I conclude that 'there are other people out there', i.e. entities who are conscious, and seemingly volitional, and emotive, in short who seemingly like me 'have a soul'. But that inference, though a good working hypothesis, has no deductive certainty; it is still quite conceivable that the 'other people' I perceive are empty phantasms.

Clearly, these deeper doubts (though picky) make the argument by analogy we mentioned to start with even more tenuous. If Man's soul is in doubt, it cannot be

adduced very convincingly in support of a world soul (i.e. God).

## 5. Disproofs of God?

a. The counterargument I have given (chapter 14.1), that *if the world requires explanation, how much more does God require it*, is an excellent way to neutralize certain traditional proofs of God. A Being capable of creating a world as great and marvelous as this, has to be still greater and more marvelous; to posit such a Being increases rather than decreases theoretical difficulties, and therefore presents no logical advantage.

This is comparable to the well-known counterargument that *if the world requires a cause, then so does God*, for if the antecedent is based on the principle that everything requires a cause, then the consequent has to submit to the same principle. In other words, the idea that everything has a cause is a thesis that the causal chain is infinite; we cannot therefore consistently use it to justify a first-cause thesis. I believe we must admit of first causes within the world—for instance, in freely willed acts by humans (influences on whom do not constitute causes in the deterministic sense here used); in that case, the world may need no cause or may have as first cause a causeless God.

We can join and contrapose the two statements and say *if God requires no cause or explanation, nor does the world*.

My counterargument is I think original, but finally merely a broadening of an older counterargument[16]. In any event, these arguments do not disprove God, they merely neutralize alleged proofs of God; that is, they demonstrate that those so-called proofs are not conclusive.

b. I have said that you cannot conclusively disprove God, either. Sure, theodicy—since the Book of Job[17]—gives us ample reasons to doubt God, as we conceive Him through Judaism. *If God is perfectly just and full of love for His creatures, then how come terrible crimes are not prevented and innocent victims are not protected?* There is no excuse for such negligence[18]: if human freedom would have otherwise been impossible to create (as some argue[19]), there was still the option of not creating humankind at all (and regarding why we were created no plausible argument is found by anybody).

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16 Which I learned from Ayn Rand, but which I seem to remember Aristotle previously taught.

17 Incidentally, referring to my earlier comments concerning those who add insult to injury, and without cause accuse all victims of crime or misfortune of having somehow deserved it. It occurs to me that Job had said it already, in his complaints against the unfair and unkind accusations by his three friends (see also Ferm p. 61-62).

18 To argue that 'God gives the criminal time to repent' is absurd, since the victim is thus forgotten.

19 But I do not see why a timely destruction of Hitler and his ilk would have been a problem. Since the world is well able to exist for long periods without such horrors, it follows that human freedom does not require them.

Such argument convinces many people that God does not exist, or at least that He is not as described by apologists, since there are evidently contradictions between the expectations raised by religion and historical and personal experience. Nevertheless, while powerful, such argument does not strictly disprove God: (i) What is just or unjust is sometimes if not always unclear or problematic; judges or jurors often disagree, for a variety of reasons. (ii) There may be hidden pathways to justice which in the long term restore the balance, as defenders of faith have often argued.

I am personally not greatly impressed by such defenses, for to (i) I would respond that only the (innocent) victim can decide whether it feels justly dealt with or not, if he/she is still alive and fit, and to (ii) I would respond that justice hidden or delayed is justice denied, the issue is prevention not mere cure. Nevertheless, we must grant that none of such arguments or counterarguments logically permits us to draw a decisive conclusion. Arguments from theodicy result in at best the improbability of the existence of God as we imagine Him (i.e. just and loving).

c. There is another old objection that puts God in serious doubt, or at least God as we conceive Him. It is: *if God is eternal, perfect, self-sufficient and satisfied, then He is immune* to any danger or desire, and therefore has no need or motive to create/destroy or pursue/avoid anything, no use for temporal things or events. God, alone, without need of others since complete, with nothing to fear

since eternal, would not suddenly put in motion unnecessary turbulences in His unity, generating lies[20] and suffering for no conceivable reason. He is not lonely or bored, nothing exists to affect Him or which is capable of doing so, so why would He bother?

I think this points to a weighty contradiction. What it means is that the *hypothesis* that a God exists with such and such characteristics (eternity, etc.) is belied by the *empirical data* that a temporal world at all exists (quite apart from the lies and suffering in it). Thus, what we apparently have here in inductive terms is not mere reduction in probability and putting in doubt of a thesis, but its decisive rejection and elimination. The world is not only not a proof, but it is a disproof of God!

This counterargument is not new to philosophy, but I failed to consider it previously and to see its persuasiveness. I was taken in by arguments found in Rabbinic literature, which referred to God's spontaneous will to create the world and humanity out of pure love, to share His life and joy—but now, upon reflection, I realize such theses do not stand to reason! It follows that we do not merely have (a) an absence of proof for God, or (b) complaints which make Him improbable—we have (c) in the very existence of a temporal world, an actual disproof.

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[20] When I speak of lies here, I mean that if existence is essentially unitary, then it follows that the world of plurality is all illusions, and created illusions are lies.

But upon further reflection, I am not too sure of the finality of the above objection. For the description of God relied on here makes Him resemble a stone! We rather conceive God as in the image and likeness of humans, that is as having freewill (and that to an extreme degree). And I believe, though I have not yet demonstrated it, that freedom of the will conceptually requires the ability (though not necessity) to act quite anarchically, without purpose (not even the goal of acting without purpose). If this is indeed a characteristic of human volition, then there is no reason to deny a similar feature to Divine will.

d. Another influential argument in favor of atheism is the perspective modern science has given mankind regarding how very little space and time it occupies in this universe.

Modern science has of course raised considerable doubts about the veracity and accuracy of Biblical and other religious accounts, taken literally, of the universe and of mankind's position in it. Examples of such deficiency are countless. Critics often point out the numerous and important deficiencies of the Biblical narrative of Creation (e.g. with regard to the duration and order of universal development, the non-mention of extinct species and geological changes, and so forth); but there are many other issues (e.g. the proposed listing of ethnic groups and their relations). Also in other religions there are, according to modern science, serious errors (for example, the Hindu-Buddhist belief in an eternal cyclical universe).

However, the issue I wish to focus on here is not related to specific traditional claims, but has a more theological character:

(i) Although modern science has concluded that the universe is not infinite (but to date about 13.7 *billion light years* in diameter, according to some), it has also made clear how comparatively minuscule our home is (a planet some 12'750 km in diameter). We are living on *a mere speck of dust*, in one galaxy comprising some 200 billion stars like the Sun, in a world of some 80 billion galaxies (according to one article I read).

(ii) Also, our planet is a rather late arrival on the world scene (being some 4.5 billion years old, I read), and the human species as such is a very late arrival on it (although life is considered to have started here say 4 billion years ago, *homo sapiens* appeared in the evolutionary chain perhaps some 200'000 years ago). History (comprising the remnants of human culture) stretches barely 6'000 years (or rather, lately, some 10'000 years): it is a puny detail in the story of life on Earth.

Thus, modern science has shown mankind to be a very, very tiny detail in space and time – and the theological question naturally arises: *why would God create such a spatially and temporally enormous theatre, if His purpose in creation was only the drama of human redemption?*

Before the advent of modern science (starting with the Copernican revolution), people imagined their life at

centre-stage, and the stage as not much larger than the earth and not much older than human history. But now we know ourselves to be a mere detail in a very grand tapestry.

Galileo was persecuted by some Churchmen, because they realized the danger he posed to their religious doctrines; and they were not far wrong in that assumption. Modern atheism is largely based on *the perspective* modern science (astronomy, biology) gives on humanity. Paradoxically, today's human arrogance is based on a humble realization of human insignificance in the larger scheme of things.

The issue is not only what the Bible stated incorrectly or did not say – but moreover an issue of dimensions, of the disproportion between us and the rest of the universe. This thought, tacitly or explicitly, is a strong force for atheism in today's world. Defenders of religion must take it into account and propose convincing replies. And indeed, upon reflection, the argument of perspective is not unbeatable.

We could turn it around and say: God made a world so enormous around us so as *to give us a hint of His infinite greatness*. Our whole universe, for all its immensity in our eyes, is perhaps in turn a mere speck of dust in God's eyes. The faithful have always acknowledged God's greatness in comparison to humans, and indeed have considered it an argument in favor of awe and worship.

Moreover, it could be argued that God also wanted *to give us a hint of His great love for us*. How so? If one considers

a task of little worth, one devotes little time and effort to it. But God took billions of years of complex preparation before producing mankind – forming and destroying stars, forming our planet, developing life on it, making and breaking numerous habitats and species, until finally the (still very perfectible) human species emerged historically.

We may in this context, for example, quote Psalms 113:5-6.

> *"Who is like the Eternal our God, Who, [though] enthroned on high, lowers Himself to look upon the heavens and the earth?"*

Like an artist of great genius, God has created a massive masterpiece around the detail that mattered most to Him, to give it richness and depth. In His infinite love, He has made a free gift of attention and care to inferior creatures like us (a bit as if we were to adopt microbes as pets!)

# 2. CHAPTER TWO

Drawn from *Buddhist Illogic* (2002),

Chapter 10.

## NAGARJUNA ON GOD AND CREATION

### 1. Nagarjuna's main arguments

Nagarjuna sought to show[21] that it is "unintelligible to assert the existence of God as the creator or maker of the universe"[22]. He does this by means of several arguments, which I shall try to summarize, based on Cheng's account,

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[21] See Cheng, pp. 89-96 on this topic. He refers to MT XXII, as well as to TGT X, XII:1 and the last chapter.

[22] Note that Nagarjuna identifies God with the Indian deity *Isvara*. Cheng wonders in passing whether this was warranted; a more accurate identification would in my view have been with the *Brahman* of Hinduism. However, this need not concern us here, for the attributes used by him to describe God correspond to those any Western philosopher would grant.

and to evaluate. Let me say at the outset that I personally do not believe we can prove or disprove the idea of God[23], so I cannot be accused of having an ax to grind on this issue. If Nagarjuna's conclusion is deemed a disproof and denial of the concept, I am showing it erroneous. But if it is deemed a mere denial that the concept can be proved, I agree with him but am showing his reasoning in favor of such conclusion logically inadequate.

**(a) One argument proceeds as follows: "if there is a fact of producing, making or creating… what is produced?" It is either the "already produced" or the "not yet produced" or the "being produced". These three alternatives can, according to Nagarjuna, be "refuted in the same way as the concept of motion", whence production "cannot be established" and therefore "it makes no sense" to affirm a "creator or maker".**

The pattern and content of this argument are by now familiar to us (see higher up), all Nagarjuna does here is repeat it with reference to the universe and God. But since, as we have already shown, the argument against production is logically worthless, the conclusion against creationism and God drawn from it is also without

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[23] I normally follow a Jewish tradition that the word should be written incompletely, as "G-d" – but this has proven confusing for many people. The reason for the tradition is to avoid that the word be taken into an impure place or be physically torn or deleted.

credibility.[24] But note additionally that Nagarjuna does not, as philosophers often do, make any radical distinction between "production" in the sense applicable within the universe (which is a mere reshuffling of preexisting elements) and "creation or making" in the sense applicable to the universe (which is *ex nihilo*, or at least a conversion of the spiritual substance of God into material and other substances).

**(b) The next argument we shall review is more interesting. Let us suppose that something (symbolized by an 'x') is "made or produced by someone or something". Now, x has to be made either "by itself" or "by another" or "by both" or "by no cause". But, firstly, x cannot be made by itself, for that would imply that "it makes its own substance", and "a thing cannot use itself to make itself" for that would be "reflexive action", i.e. the thing would be "both subject and object at once," which is impossible since "subject and object are different." Secondly, x cannot be made by some other thing, because the latter would be "causal conditions" and these ought to be considered as "its substance" and so would be "the same" and not**

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[24] Fallacy of the Ungranted Premise. This consists in taking for granted a premise which is not generally accepted and which has not been adequately supported, or indeed which is generally unaccepted or which has been convincingly refuted.

**"other". It follows that x cannot be made both by itself and by another. Lastly, x cannot be made by no cause, because "there would be a fallacy of eternalism".**

It is not clear to me what or who is the subject, x, of this argument. It might be intended to be the universe or God. In either case, the argument seems to be that a thing can neither be self-created, nor be other-created, nor be both, nor be uncreated (i.e. neither). With regard to self-creation, I would agree with Nagarjuna that the concept is nonsensical. His second thesis, denying that something can be "made by another", is however not convincing. He claims that the causes or conditions of something have to be counted as part (of the substance) of that thing, so that the alleged "other" is in fact not "other" (implying that the concept of other-creation is self-contradictory). But we do not ordinarily count all "causal conditions" of a thing as part of it or of its substance; we might do so in some cases, if such antecedents are exclusive to that thing and no other factors can be used to define it, but usually we would regard them as separate events that bring it about.[25]

The third thesis, against "both" self and other creation, could be admitted offhand since we have admitted his first thesis that a thing creating itself (wholly, *ex nihilo*) is impossible. Alternatively, we could interpret the third thesis as referring to something partly created by another,

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25 Fallacy of the Ungranted Premise.

and then that part proceeding to create the remaining parts. If we so conceive Nagarjuna's third option, as other and self creation in sequence, we have to disagree that this is impossible. As for the fourth thesis, that a thing may be created by neither self nor other, i.e. may be uncreated, again two interpretations are possible. One, which Nagarjuna mentions, is that the causeless was always there; Nagarjuna considers that impossible, in accord with Buddhist doctrine that eternity is a fallacious concept, but I have seen no logical justification of that viewpoint and to my Western mind eternity (of God or of the universe) is quite conceivable. Another interpretation, which Nagarjuna apparently ignores, is that something might arise spontaneously, i.e. pop into existence out of nothing; this is an idea which some find unconscionable, but we may accept it as at least imaginable.[26]

To summarize, Nagarjuna conceives of four scenarios for creation, and claims to find reason to reject all four, concluding that the idea of God creating universe is unthinkable and therefore that God is unintelligible. We, however, are not overwhelmed by his arguments. Only his rejection of self-creation makes sense. His rejection of other-creation is forced. His interpretations of "both" and

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[26] Fallacy of the Denial of One and All. This consists in denying one theory about some issue, and making it seem as if one has thus denied all possible theories about it. The denial, to be thorough, must indeed consider all alternative theories before drawing such negative conclusion about the issue.

"neither" are incomplete, and we can offer additional ones, which leave the issues open. The dilemma as a whole is therefore inconclusive, and Nagarjuna may not logically draw the conclusions he draws.[27] However, let us return briefly to Nagarjuna's second thesis, for he might be trying to formulate a more complex thought than appears.

Let us suppose Nagarjuna is discussing *whether God created the universe*. If we take "the universe" as an open-ended concept including whatever happens to exist at any one time, then God was himself *the whole* universe before He created *the rest of* the universe[28]. Viewing creation

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[27] Fallacy of the Inconclusive Dilemma. This consists in making a dilemma appear conclusive, when in fact one (or all) of its horns (major premises) is (or are) problematic rather than assertoric. Dilemmatic argument can be validated only when its major premises are all proper if-then statements, not when any of them is an "if – maybe-then" statement.

[28] Cheng at one point (p. 92) recalls Bertrand Russell's argument against God and creationism – that while it is reasonable to inquire about the causes of particular phenomena, it is nonsensical to inquire about a cause for the totality of all phenomena. This is of course a very forceful argument, considering that (as we have seen) the concept of causality arises only in response to perceived regularities of conjunction between phenomena (here including in this term, as well as sensory or mental perceptions, intuitive experiences and conceptions). It is true that the search for causes of phenomena is always a search for other phenomena that might be regularly conjoined with them. But Russell's argument is not logically conclusive. For if God existed, and we could one day perceive Him (or a "part" or "aspect" of Him), He would simply be *one more* phenomenon. In which case, creation would refer, not to causation of the *totality* of phenomena (by a non-

thusly, we are not talking about *ex nihilo* creation, which is a confused concept since it ignores or obscures the preexistence of something (God) doing the creating – but of an earlier universe, with *only* God in it, giving rise to a later universe, with God *plus* other things (matter, people with minds) in it[29]. The mystery of creation in that case is simply, how can a *spiritual* entity, such as the God we conceive, produce *matter*, either from nowhere (i.e. without self-diminishment) or out of itself (as the *tsimtsum* concept of creation of Jewish Kabbalah seems to suggest)? The latter idea, that God might have given something of Himself to fashion matter, does not seem too difficult to accept philosophically (though some may consider it sacrilegious, as it implies that God either was diminished thereby or consented to transform part of His spirituality, if only a tiny speck of it, to the lower status of material substance).

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phenomenon), but simply to causation by one phenomenon of *all other* phenomena – which is a quite consistent viewpoint. If "the universe" is understood in a fixed, narrow sense, of course it is absurd to seek for a cause of it beyond it. But if the term is taken as open to all comers, no difficulty arises. A term with similar properties is the term "Nature" – if we understand it rigidly, "miracles" are possible; but if we take it flexibly, the concept of something "supernatural" like that becomes at best merely conventional.

[29] Of course, Nagarjuna would reject the proposition that God is eternal and at some time chose to create the world, since he does not admit of eternity.

It should be pointed out here that ‘creation’ does not simply mean causality by God of (the rest of) the universe. The presumed type of causality involved is volition, a free act of will, rather than causation. Furthermore, God is not conceived as the direct cause of everything in the universe, but merely as First Cause and Prime Mover, i.e. as the cause of its initial contents and their initial movement, as well as of the ‘laws of nature’ governing them. This might be taken to mean, in a modern perspective, the core matter subject to the Big Bang, the ignition of that explosion and the programming of the evolution of nature thereafter, including appearance of elementary particles, atoms of increasing complexity, stars and planets, molecules, living cells, evolution of life forms, organisms with consciousness and will, and so forth (creationism need not be considered tied to a literal Biblical scenario).

Once God has willed (i.e. created) inchoate nature, it continues on its course in accordance with causation, with perhaps room for spontaneous events (as quantum mechanics suggests) and for localized acts of volition (by people, and perhaps higher animals, when they appear on the scene). As already mentioned, there are degrees of causation; and when something causes some second thing that in turn causes some third thing, it does not follow that the first thing is a cause of the third, and even in cases where it is (thus indirectly) a cause, the degree of causation involved may be diminished in comparison with the preceding link in the chain (dampening). Similarly with volition, the cause of a cause may be a lesser cause

or not a cause at all. It is therefore inaccurate to regard a First Cause, such as God is conceived to be relative to nature, as being ‘cause of everything’ lumped together irrespective of process. The succession of causal events and the varieties of causal relations involved, have to be taken into consideration.

Spontaneity of physical events and freedom of individual (human or animal) volition are not in logical conflict with creation, because they still occur in an existence context created by God. God may well be the indirect cause of spontaneous or individually willed events, in the sense of making them possible, without being their direct cause, in the sense of making them necessary or actualizing them. Furthermore, to affirm creation does not logically require that we regard, as did some Greek philosophers, God as thereafter *forced to* let Nature follow its set course unhindered. It is conceivable that He chooses not to interfere at all; but it is equally conceivable that He chooses to interfere punctually, occasionally changing the course of things (this would be what we call ‘miracle’, or more broadly ‘providence’), or even at some future time arresting the world altogether. His being the world’s initiator need not incapacitate Him thereafter from getting further involved.

All that I have just described is *conceivable*, i.e. a consistent theory of creation, but this does not mean that it is definitely *proven*, i.e. deductively self-evident or

inductively the only acceptable vision of things in the context of all available empirical data. Note well that I am not trying to give unconditional support to religious dogmas of any sort. Rather, I am reacting to the pretensions of many so-called scientists today, who (based on very simplistic ideas of causality and causal logic) claim that they have definitely *disproved* creation, or who like Nagarjuna claim that it is logically *not even thinkable*. Such dogmas are not genuine philosophy. One should never let oneself be intimidated by either priestly or academic prestige, but always remain open-minded and consider facts and arguments impartially and fairly.

Alternatively, Nagarjuna could be supposed to discuss in his second thesis *whether God was created by something else*. In that case, I would agree with his rejection of the idea. We could claim that God is uncreated, on the ground that we have conceived God as an explanation of the world appearing before us, and cannot go on looking for an explanation of the explanation and so on, *ad infinitum*. This position can however be legitimately contested, on the ground that if we demand one explanation, consistency requires that we demand an infinite regression of them. So we are in a quandary, faced with either a lack of explanation or an overdose of explanations, neither of which is logically satisfying.

We might oppose an atheist conclusion by arguing that if we consider it acceptable to offer no explanation for the world, then we could equally well be allowed to offer none

for God. However, there is a difference between these two positions, in that the world is empirically evident before us, whereas God is not[30]; furthermore, explanations are meant to simplify problems, whereas the assumption of God introduces new and more complex questions compared to the assumption of a world without God.

In conclusion, the ideas of God and creation are certainly full of difficulties, as Nagarjuna asserts (though for the wrong reasons), but altogether abandoning them also leaves us with difficulties, which Nagarjuna does not consider. The currently most rational position is probably an agnosticism leaning towards atheism. This does not preclude a personal leap of faith, based not on reason but on more emotional grounds – that is precisely what we mean by 'faith'[31]. It is interesting to note, concerning Buddhism, that "when someone asked Buddha the

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[30] The theory that God exists counts the existence of the world as empirical evidence for itself, since that is what the theory is constructed to explain. But this confirming evidence is *not exclusive* to that theory, since it is also claimed by contrary theories. This standoff could only be resolved, deductively, if some inextricable inconsistencies were found in all but one theory; or inductively, if some empirical detail were found which is explicable by one theory *and not by the others*.

[31] Even Buddhism calls on its adherents to have faith – faith enough to pursue enlightenment by meditation or whatever practices, till they get there and see its truth directly for themselves.

question whether the world was made by God, he did not answer"[32].

Cheng tells us that "the true Madhyamika approach" is "neither theistic nor atheistic", but merely that God "cannot be *conceived* of as existing". Nagarjuna does not really infer from the latter (though at times he seems to) that God does not exist, because "only a significant statement can be significantly negated or contradicted". Thus, even agnosticism is rejected by him, since it considers the issue meaningful. Clearly, I am disagreeing, and maintaining that God is (somewhat) conceivable, but is neither provable nor disprovable; i.e. a reasonably intelligible and consistent theological theory can be formulated, but it remains speculative as we have no way to verify or falsify it.

## 2. Other issues raised

Other issues raised by Nagarjuna include the following:

- **He asks who in turn created God, and who in turn created that creator of the creator, ad infinitum?** This is of course a serious logical issue, legitimately raised. We have already addressed it, without claiming to have finally resolved it. The important counter-

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[32] Cheng, p. 93.

argument to note here is that atheism, too, leaves an unanswered question: how come existence exists?[33]

- **Nagarjuna asks in what place God was staying when he created the world, and in what place he put the world he created, and whether he or another created those places; and he claims that such considerations give rise to infinite regress of creations and creators.** This query is also legitimate, but more easily opposed. One might hypothesize that God takes up no space and created space as well as its contents. One might add the more modern view, that space is not independent of matter, nor 'occupied' by it, but a relation between material items. It is also interesting to note that modern physics postulates certain basic constituents of matter as without spatial extension.
- **He asks why, if God (as we conceive Him) is omnipotent and omniscient, and so unhindered by obstacles, He did not create the world "in its totality at one and the same time".** To me this question does not seem very unsettling – we can just answer, why

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[33] Fallacy of the Double Standard. This consists in being severe towards one's opponent's argument while being lenient with regard to one's own argument, although the two arguments are formally similar or have similar strengths and/or weaknesses.

not? I mean, if God had done so, Nagarjuna would be asking: why not create a world of process?[34]

- He should rather have asked why, if God (as we conceive Him) is complete and self-sufficient, and so lacking nothing and so desiring nothing, He created the world at all. What might possibly have been His motive? That is a $64,000 question, for which no answer is forthcoming from anyone! **Nagarjuna perhaps senses this question, when he argues that "God wanted to create all creatures" implies antecedent "causal conditions", i.e. that "all things were produced from *karma*".** But it must be pointed out that if creation is an act of volition, it might well be without motive, and even if it has a motive such motive would be an influence but not a deterministic cause. There is no inconsistency in regarding free will as occasionally motiveless, or when motivated as unforced by its motives. That is precisely what distinguishes volition from mechanical action: it remains free and the responsibility of the Agent irrespective of all surrounding circumstances.
- **Nagarjuna also brings up "the problem of evil" (what we today call theodicy, i.e. the justice of God): if God (as we conceive Him) is omnipotent, omniscient and infinitely good, just and compassionate, why does He let "moral evil and**

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[34] Fallacy of the Double Standard.

**physical suffering" exist in the world? "Evil men enjoy happiness and… good men suffer" and yet God will not or cannot prevent it. "If God cannot prevent evil he is not omnipotent, and if he can but will not, he is not all good." Thus, at least two of the attributes we assign to Him, omnipotence and perfect goodness, are mutually contradictory, given that "obviously, there is evil in the world" (and being omniscient, He must be aware of it). Therefore, God is either "not omnipotent" or "not all good" (or both), which in either case would mean a lack of the attributes we conceive him as having to have to be God, so that "he is not God" and "God cannot be conceived to exist".**

This is of course a big issue for theists to face, and Nagarjuna's reasoning here is generally valid. However, the problem is not logically insurmountable and Nagarjuna's conclusion is too quick and radical. For we can suppose that God has a more complex accounting process in mind (regarding reward and punishment, tit for tat), or that He has instituted a system of trials for our ultimate greater good. What we view as inexcusable suffering of innocents, may in God's view not be as serious as we think, because (as Buddhism itself ultimately suggests) suffering is superficial and illusory. We may even have volunteered to be born into this world of apparently unjust suffering, to fulfill some purpose for God. And so forth

– the concepts involved are logically too vague and uncertain to allow us to draw a definite conclusion.

### 3. Buddhism and Theism

Before leaving this topic, I would like to make some comments regarding Buddhism in general. At its core, the Buddhist doctrine is not theistic, in the sense of believing in a creator, nor particularly anti-theistic, though effectively atheistic. However, having arisen in Indian culture, it adopted ideas of gods, in the sense of supermen or supernatural beings, who were however themselves still ultimately subject to the Four Noble Truths, i.e. though they were very high-minded and heavenly, due to their good karma, they too eventually had to find liberation from the karmic cycle or face a lesser rebirth. At a later stage, as Cheng says, "the Buddha was deified", not in the sense of being regarded as creator, but in the sense of having the other "main admirable characteristics of God or divine being" that we have listed above. Initially a saintly man, he was promoted by his disciples to the highest rank of godliness, above all the other gods just described, because no longer subject to ignorance and karma. He had, as it were, dissolved in the universal unity (reality, *nirvana*) underlying the world of multiplicity (illusion, *samsara*), and thus merged with what might be called God.

Another aspect to be mentioned is that of *idolatry*, i.e. the worship of statues representing gods. This practice was present in Indian culture when Buddhism arose, and in other Asian cultures when Buddhism later reached them. Buddhists soon adopted this practice too, making and worshipping statues of the Buddha, and later other presumed Buddhas, boddhisattvas and arhats (saints). For at least some Buddhist sects, prayer and offerings to such statues seems to be the main religious activity. It is very surprising that Buddhism did not from its inception firmly discard such polytheism and idol worship. One would have thought, considering the otherwise 'scientific' mindedness of core Buddhist doctrine, that it would have sharply criticized and inhibited such irrelevant and dubious tendencies. No doubt, the initial motive was tolerance, taking potential converts as they were and avoiding conflict; but this attitude effectively perpetuated primitive habits.[35]

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[35] I have never seen idolatry even questioned in any Buddhist text, ancient or modern! But anyway my historical analysis is confirmed by Humphreys: "As it gently flowed into country after country… [Buddhism] tended to adopt, or failed to contest the rival claims of, the indigenous beliefs, however crude. In this way the most divers and debased beliefs were added to the corpus of 'Buddhism', and embarrass the student to-day" (p. 12). Later, he writes: "Certainly within a hundred years of the death of Asoka… from a human being the Buddha had become a super-human being, and his spiritual Essence had entered a pantheon nearly as large as that of the Hinduism from which it largely derived" (pp. 48-49).

But it ought to be emphasized that the worship of carvings of Buddhas is *in direct logical contradiction* with the 'nothing has a self' doctrine of Buddhism, since it involves *a mental projection of selfhood into statues*. The fact is that, *in the idol worshipper's mind*, the figure he calls to and bows to is somehow a part of or an emanation of or a conduit to the transcendent deity, and so possessed of a (derivative) 'soul'. Thus, idolatry *perpetuates* one of the main psychological errors of people, according to Buddhism. If it is ignorance to assign soul to a living being, which at least seems to have consciousness, emotion and volition, how much more foolish it is to assign it to stone (or paper or even, finally, mental) images! Ordinary Buddhists surely cannot hope to attain the ideal of Buddhism by such practices, which have exactly the opposite educational effect.

All this to say that, whereas the core Buddhist doctrine is not especially concerned with theological ideas or issues, but with promoting wise and loving attitudes and behavior patterns, tending to enlightenment and liberation, Buddhism in practice is, for most of its adherents still today, a theism of sorts.

It should moreover be stressed that the attack on Creation is a distraction. The main underlying problem of the beginning of things remains, even for non-theists. Physicists have to face it, and so do Buddhists. In the latter context, in the beginning is the "original ground" of Nirvana. Its nature and essence is stillness, quietness,

peace, perfection and fulfillment. All of a sudden, it stirs and subdivides; then more and more, till it engages in a frenzy of motion and distinctions. Samsara is born and proceeds. Since then, according to Buddhism, existence is suffering; and the meaning of all our lives is to intentionally return to the original mind state, by means of meditation and good deeds. So, what caused this madness? Was the original ground unstable or dissatisfied? Was it an incomprehensible "spontaneous" event or was it a stupid "act of will"? Buddhism does not really explain.

Very similar notions are found in Judaism. Note first the ambivalence about Creation, which is presumed by Rabbinical commentators to be an 'act of love' by God for his creatures (on the principle that whatever God does has to be good), but at the same time is admitted as an act that gave rise (at least since the Garden of Eden incident) to empirically evident "evil" in the world. In particular, while procreation is prescribed so as to perpetuate life, the sex act is viewed as involving the "evil impulse". Note also the Jew's duty to work his/her way, through study, prayer and other good deeds (*mitzvoth*), towards – according to kabalistic interpretations – a renewed fusion with God (*teshuvah*). If we draw an analogy between the Jewish idea of God (one, unique, universal, infinite) and the less personalized Buddhist idea of Nirvana, we see the equivalence between the questions "why did God create the world?" and "why did Nirvana degenerate into Samsara?"

# 3. CHAPTER THREE

Drawn from *Phenomenology* (2003),
Chapter 9.

## THEOLOGY WITHOUT PREJUDICE

### 1. Applying logical standards to theology

Most theologians discuss God without telling us how they came to know so much about Him; they think that to refer to "revelation" through some prophet or other, or to their own alleged "insights" is enough justification. On the other hand, some science-minded philosophers do not admit of any validity to theology; they argue that the concept of God is a figment of mankind's imagination and therefore that nothing of scientific value can be said about it. Both these approaches are logically improper. Or, as it is written in Proverbs 18:13:

> "*He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him*."

Theology is undoubtedly a legitimate branch of philosophy. It is intrinsically *speculative*, in that we cannot ever hope *to prove or disprove* its basic premise that God exists, as I showed in *Judaic Logic*. Briefly put:

a. When we try to prove the existence of God with reference to the existence of the universe, or to some empirical feature (such as the order or beauty of things) or content (such as life or mankind) of the universe, we inevitably get into circular argument. For then *the same standard of judgment has to be applied* to the concept of God, i.e. we need to explain His existence or attributes and cannot take them for granted. *All the more so*, since He is less empirically evident than the things we have appealed to the concept of God to explain.

b. When we try to disprove the existence of God with reference to some empirical data or theoretical construct, we inevitably open the way to one-upmanship. However we depict the universe, the believer can always say: "well, *that's* how God made it!" The scientist (physicist, cosmologist, geologist, biologist, whatever) may well argue that a Biblical or other account of things is incorrect according to current science, but the scientist will find no argument to deny the claim that the universe *as he describes it* may have its ultimate source in "God". The scientist cannot deny "metaphysics" to the believer, without himself (i.e. the scientist) engaging in "metaphysics".

> Claiming to know that something beyond the knowable *is not*, is as pretentious as claiming to know that it *is*!

The concept of God is indeed a theoretical construct, whether someone else's or one's own. This does not imply it to be invalid or irrelevant, for the simple reason that *all* conceptual knowledge is ultimately based on "theoretical construction", including all orthodox science. A concept may be admittedly speculative, and yet of interest and relevance to human thought and action. On the other hand, it does not follow that the idea of God can be formed without regard to *empirical and logical tests*. Our discourse on this subject like any other has to be in reasonable accord with current knowledge and internally consistent.

Purely scientific knowledge follows the laws of induction very obediently: it generalizes when that is recommended and particularizes when that is recommended. When it does not find what it is looking for (e.g. a particle or a missing link) after diligent search, it assumes that what it sought was absent all along. By way of contrast, speculative knowledge remains a bit freer, refusing to generalize offhand from "not found" to "nonexistent". Scientists also speculate, keeping their minds open on certain theories or predictions for a long time. Without this attitude, their thought would always be straitjacketed by excessive formalism.

Religious thinkers have a right to a similar allowance, and should not be discredited offhand by the very nature of their search by closed-minded pseudo-scientific totalitarians. Such rejection would not be science, but secularist dogma. Nevertheless, it is true that religious thought is very often excessively informal, and tends to proceed willy-nilly without regard for the rules of induction, ignoring empirical evidence and indulging in shamelessly manipulative pseudo-deductions. Here as in any other field, we have the right to demand honesty and sanity.

In particular, I would characterize as cretinism the debonair approach of some religious fundamentalists, consisting in simply refusing to accept the current findings and interpretations of science, like the Big Bang cosmological theory or the Evolution theory in biology (or in the not so faraway past, the Copernican system). Such theories are in no way (as far as I can tell) incoherent with Creationism, i.e. the simple idea that God created the material universe, even if some scientists provocatively declare them to be. Even the idea that the material universe is perpetual can be reconciled with Creationism, by considering it as a timeless emanation of God.

Such theories may well be in a state of tension with too literal a reading *of the Bible* or similar documents, however. In that case, the holy book defender ought not to discredit religion entirely by insisting on antiquated viewpoints, but should rather stick to basics and essentials,

and progressively adapt his interpretations accordingly. Even if the current scientific theories are not definitely proved and scientists frankly admit to having difficulties with them, it is silly to fight a rearguard battle against sincere seekers after truth, by (for instance) forbidding the teaching of such theories in schools.

It is also worth stressing the immense riches of reflection involved in scientific thought. Those who resist progress should but consider the grand tapestry of evolving life taught by modern biology, which is just a continuation of the still broader narrative of the evolution of matter taught by modern cosmology. What a loss to humanity if these profound insights were lost, which teach us humility and solidarity.

The phenomenological approach to theology consists simply in remaining at all times aware of the processes through which our theological beliefs or disbeliefs are generated and built-up. Our reason can then evaluate the processes, and in a balanced manner (with neither excess rationalism nor excess emotionalism) arrive at moderate, non-ideological conclusions.

It is important to accept at the outset that God's existence and attributes can, for us common folk who have not been privileged with direct and epistemologically indubitable experiences or visions of God, only be hypothesized, and indeed only be speculated upon. *Concepts* of God and His attributes can be built up and made cogent, but can never ordinarily be established. Some doubt always does and

will remain, and this is where faith is brought into play (making certain actions possible despite legitimate doubt).

And by the way, if these limits to human knowledge are evidently true with respect to God and his defining attributes, how much more true they are with regard to all the stories, rituals and laws found in written and oral traditions. The latter do not follow automatically upon faithful acceptance of the former, and there are many conflicting theses (all the religions and sects).

## 2. Conceiving the Divine attributes

The epistemological question as to how we humans conceive the Divine attributes must not be confused with the issue of proving that the Creator has them (granting His existence, which is not easy to prove[36]). Explaining the arising of a concept (if only for speculative purposes) is easier than, and of course prior to, proving it. It is widely understood, by believers, agnostics and atheists alike, that we conceive God's attributes by means of *extrapolation from our own limited attributes*. Even God's **unity, uniqueness, ubiquity and infinity** are so conceived. Any valuable or virtuous power found in us in limited degrees, is considered as present in God in unlimited degree. Thus:

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36 Or to disprove.

- From our partial power of volition or freewill, we can conceive that God has or would have total power – **omnipotence** (or all-powerfulness).
- From our partial power of knowledge, we can conceive that God has or would have total power – **omniscience** (or total knowledge).
- From our partial power of loving-kindness and mercy, we can conceive that God has or would have total power – **all-mercifulness** (or complete kindness).
- From our partial power of justice, we can conceive that God has or would have total power – **perfect justice**.

Likewise for all values and virtues, we pass from our own imperfect qualities to God's extreme possession of them. We generalize from 'some' good in us to 'all' good in Him. This is an ordinary *inductive* movement of thought, requiring no special justification. From a relatively empirical concept, we project a hypothetical concept, which is thereafter open to discussion (further confirmation or eventual rejection). We do not need to actually stretch our minds as far as the extreme, and personally experience infinity, omniscience or omnipotence, to be able to conceive it[37]. Just as general

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[37] My position here is intended to mitigate some of my statements in *Judaic Logic*.

propositions are knowable[38], so are hyperbolic concepts. However, to repeat, conceiving does not imply proving.

Note that, inversely, with regard to faults or vices, while we have some, God has none. Here, we do not go from some bad to all bad, but to no bad. This is done to maintain speculative consistency: we cannot affirm extreme positives, if we do not deny the corresponding moderate or extreme negatives. Some people hypothesize both positive and negative gods (the Zoroastrian religion, or the currents of Christianity which believe in an independent devil); but in those cases neither proposed entity has *stricto sensu* extreme attributes, since they are in competition.

As it happens, while these generalizations individually are logically acceptable, in some cases taken together with each other or with other items of knowledge or belief, they may cause logical difficulties. We are then called upon to try and reconcile the conflicting theses. Notably, Divine omnipotence may be viewed as in logical conflict with natural determinism (in the case of Divine Providence) or human freewill (as an abdication of power by God). Or omniscience may be regarded as conflicting with the unpredictability of human freewill. Or again, infinite mercy and total justice can be considered as in mutual conflict, as well as in conflict with the apparent facts of

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[38] This is incontrovertible, since its denial is self-contradictory, being a general proposition itself.

unpunished vice or unmerited enjoyment, or of unrewarded virtue or undeserved suffering.

But as we shall see, our conceptions of the Divine attributes are not just generated by such simple extrapolations of human attributes; more refinements are involved in each case.

- Our concept of omnipotence is also based on the human analogy that just as a person (or group) can apparently interfere in the otherwise natural course of some events, so can God but only more so, i.e. whatever the events. Also, just as one person (or group) can physically or through mental (including verbal) influence delimit, force or block, incline or disincline another to engage in certain voluntary acts, so God can exercise His will on occasion without implying that Man in principle lacks freewill.
- On the other hand, whereas human freedom of will is naturally limited, i.e. there are natural laws and human events (and possibly Divine decrees) no person or group can circumvent or affect, in the case of God as we conceive Him no such limitation exists, He is stronger than all other forces combined. Though God could make Nature lawless or prevent any human freedom of choice, He usually chooses not to act thus, but only exceptionally (according to Biblical accounts of miracles) interferes in natural or human affairs. Precisely that is His apparent will, that there should be

natural law and human freedom of will, since that is what seems to be occurring.

- Similarly, regarding omniscience, we can render our concept of God's power more credible by considering the corresponding smaller-scale human power in greater detail. Some philosophers consider that Divine omniscience is logically incompatible with human freewill, since it would imply that God knows Man's choices before he makes them. However, if we reflect, we can see on the human scale that these ideas are more compatible than that.
    - A person can, through memory or by inferences, see his own or other people's past acts of will: such *hindsight* by us of volitional events does not seem contradictory. If we conceive God as located at the end of time (our own or all history or eternity), looking back at all our acts of will, the problem dissolves. That is, the said problem arises due to an assumption of foresight (as would be the case for humans), but seems less intractable if hindsight (for God) is assumed.
    - As I argue elsewhere (e.g. see chapter VI, 2.3), we can *experience* motion directly within the present moment, i.e. without recourse to memory. It follows that the present is for us *extended in time* (a moment), and not just a point in time (an instant). The extent of this

experienced stretch of time is admittedly small in our case, but it is conceivably larger for God's span of awareness, covering what is for us a big chunk of time at once. This thesis is all the more conceivable, because the present seems even for us of variable breadth.

- If God can thus overview human lifetimes or all of history or eternity in one grand 'moment', then He is always with regard to such stretch of time effectively in a position of hindsight, i.e. He can see our volitions without affecting them. Within the grand moment accessible to Him, all events are quasi-simultaneous, as if He could mentally travel instantaneously from its beginning to its end and back at will. Thus, what appears to us as paradoxical foresight would simply to him constitute hindsight.

- Note additionally that omniscience does not only mean the ability to know across time, but more broadly to know all events everywhere, as well as all timeless events (abstracts). Seeing events many places at once could be viewed as almost as problematic as seeing events in many times at once. Yet, just as human perception can evidently overview a considerable amount of space, so by extension it is conceivable that God can perceive all space.

- I think that a lot of the conceptual difficulty many have with the idea of God can be dissolved if we view God as positioned proximately and parallel to and at least coextensive with (and probably much greater than) the natural world we live in. By that I mean that the view of God as suspended far away from it all causes conceptual difficulty in relating Him to the natural world. But if we rather understand God as hidden behind (or underneath or above or next to) the natural world, separated from it only by the veil of our own blindness to Him, then He becomes more conceivable[39].

- To modernize these ideas with reference to Relativity Theory, we could speculate that God (as regards the world we inhabit, at least) resides ***at the center (or better, throughout the inside and perhaps also beyond) of the four-dimensional space-time 'sphere' (whose 'surface' is our material world)***. In this way, God would always be *equidistant* from (or better, contiguous with) all places and times, all points in this world. He would both transcend space and time, and be adjacent to (or even also immanent in) it. Perhaps this describes what mystics and deep meditators refer

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[39] The Buddhist idea of an "original ground of being" (experienced in deep meditation) from which phenomenal existences appear to spring, is a useful image in this context. Another image we can use is the Kantian idea of a Noumenon underlying the Phenomenon.

to as the "eternal present". (Note also that Albert Einstein's arguments refer to the immanent *material* world and the maximum velocity of light signals in it: he does not consider or deny that *consciousness* may transcend matter, nor that its scope might be instantaneous.)[40]

The above comments are not intended as exhaustive.

## 3. Analyzing omniscience and omnipotence

In *Judaic Logic*[41], I expressed some misgiving concerning the consistency of the concept of omniscience. The following is an attempt to analyze the issue further.

The form (a) "I know that (I know nothing)" is inconsistent, since it implies "I know something" and "I know nothing" (i.e. "I do not know anything").

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[40] In this spherical perspective, we can conceive of Creation as timeless, and thus perhaps come to an agreement with Stephen Hawking. Creation would refer to the interface or transition between God (the spiritual core) and the material universe (the outer crust). Tangentially, within the four-dimensional surface, there would be no spatial or temporal beginning; but along the radius of the sphere, the surface has a beginning.

[41] Chapter 14.

The following forms are, however, consistent: (b) I do not know that (I know nothing); (c) I know that (I know something); (d) I do not know that (I know something).

Strictly speaking, the paradox in (a) yields the conclusion (b), rather than (c), i.e. it does not exclude (d) at the outset. Unless we regard "I know nothing" as inherently paradoxical too, in which case "I know something" is implied: I think this is justified by reflection, i.e. once "I know nothing" is affirmed, we can classify it as a claim to knowledge, and thus reject it as implicitly inconsistent. Another way to the same result is to say that the "I do not know..." forms, (b) and (d), are implicitly claims to knowledge, about the state of one's knowledge or ignorance, so that they imply (c).

Self-consciousness, even of one's ignorance, implies consciousness, and therefore knowledge. Or simply put, (c) is logically true of all self-conscious beings (i.e. humans and God, at least - perhaps some higher animals too). However, *we* cannot claim (c) true for seemingly merely conscious beings, we can only say for them "they know something".

The form of omniscience is (e) "I know that (I know everything)". The simpler form "I know everything" implies the reflexive, because if you know everything, then you must also know that fact. This is self-consistent, and therefore claimable for God. The form (f) "I do not know that (I know everything)" is *not* self-consistent,

since it both implies “I do not know something” and *allows for* “I know everything”.

Similarly, (g) “I know that (I do not know everything)” is self-consistent, as is the prior form “I do not know everything”, and this is the situation for humans and perhaps some higher animals (in both cases) and merely conscious animals (in the non-reflexive case). The form (h) “ I do not know that (I do not know everything)” implies both “I do not know something” and “I do not know everything”, the former of which implies the latter of which: there is no inconsistency.

The difficulty in the concept of omniscience is not deductive, but inductive. Granting you know everything, then of course you know that you know everything. But it is also conceivable that you have arrived at total knowledge gradually, by inductive processes, in which case, how would you know for sure that you know everything? And if the latter *possibility* exists, then whoever is apparently in a state of total knowledge (even by non-inductive means) is also a bit in doubt about it. That is, in practice, “I know everything” does not imply “I know that (I know everything)”, or more precisely, even granting *the fact* that so and so knows everything, it does not follow that so and so *knows it* for a fact. That is, ***omniscience does not necessarily include the reflexive knowledge of one’s omniscience***. In a sense, this result looks paradoxical, but in a way it confirms my general suspicion towards self-inclusive classes.

There is also to consider the conceptual compatibility between the Divine attributes of omniscience and freewill. Theologians have considered the compatibility of God's omniscience and *Man's* freewill, though in my view not satisfactorily; that is, those who have sought reconciliation have not so far as I know really succeeded - it was rationalization rather than true resolution (I attempt a more convincing argument above). But have they at all asked how *God* could have both freewill and omniscience? If God knows everything, including in advance what He will do, how can He be said to freely choose what He does? I think my attempted answer to the first question (in the preceding section) can also be applied to the second. For God, all of time is one moment, so there is no before or after, and all knowing and doing are effectively simultaneous.

With regard to logical issues in the concept of Omnipotence, the following should be added. Omnipotence cannot be consistently defined in an unlimited manner, as literally the power to do anything whatsoever. We must rather say: God can do anything do-able in principle.

What distinguishes Him from all other entities is that whereas we finite beings can only do *some* (indeed, very few) of the things that are in the realm of the possible, God can do *all* that can conceivably be done. What He cannot conceivably do is *illogical* things like "creating Himself", or "creating things that are both A and non-A, or neither

A nor non-A", or "annulling His own omnipotence", or "annulling the factuality of past facts". We might presumably add to this list the impossibility of His self-destructing (which would contradict His eternity), or of destroying His other defining characteristics. Moreover, I would personally — perhaps because I am a Jew (I say this so as not to offend the sensibilities of Christians, Hindus and others) — consider God incapable of incarnating, i.e. concentrating His being in a finite body, while remaining infinite.

It is not however inconceivable that God would eventually annul, circumscribe or reverse natural laws that are logically (as far as we can tell) replaceable. Here a distinction has to be drawn between natural modality and logical modality (see my work *Future Logic*, in this regard). In this context, local and temporary "miracles", as are described in the Bible (e.g. the parting of the Red Sea) or other religious books, are quite conceivable – as punctual exceptions to natural law. Natural laws that are not logical laws may well be conditional upon the non-interference of God – this concept would in no way diminish their effective status as laws. Notwithstanding, it must be remembered that many such laws are logically interrelated to others, so that they might not be by-passed in isolation, but God would have to make multiple or systemic changes to produce a desired effect.

But we do not need to consider God's every interference in the world as an abrogation of natural law. God might

well have reserved for Himself a role as a powerful player *within* Nature.

This remark can be understood, if we consider the analogy of human will (or, more generally, animal will). The latter is conceived by us as able to overpower the natural (i.e. deterministic) course of event; furthermore, one human's will may be more powerful than another's. Humans (and other animals) are nevertheless considered as part of Nature, in a broader sense. We can similarly, by extension, on a larger scale and at deeper levels, regard God's providence. To refer again to Biblical examples: He may have split the waters of the sea as we would make waves in our bathtub; He may have influenced Pharaoh's decisions as we would suggest things to weaker minds.

If we limit our concept of Nature to deterministic events, then even human and animal will, let alone God's will, must be classified as unnatural. But if we understand the concept of Nature as covering *whatever happens to occur*, then not even God's eventual ad hoc interference in the ordinary course of events (deterministic or of lesser volitions) is unnatural.

Thus, to conclude, God's omnipotence cannot be conceived anarchically. God's will, in contrast to ours, is undetermined by "external" or "internal" forces and influences. But the concept remains, as for the other defining attributes, subject to consistency and other rational and empirical checks, i.e. to the laws of logic.

## 4. Harmonizing Justice and Mercy

Just as God's existence cannot be proved (or disproved), so also His attributes cannot definitively be proved (or disproved). If an attribute could be proved, that to which it is attributed would of necessity also be proved. (If all attributes could be disproved, there would be no subject left.) We may however admit as conceivable attributes that have been found internally coherent and consistent with all known facts and postulates to date. (Conversely, we may reject an attribute as being incoherently conceived or as incompatible with another, more significant principle, or again as empirically doubtful.)

Among the many theological concepts that need sorting out are those of justice and mercy[42]. Justice and Mercy: what is their border and what is their relationship?

Mercy is by definition injustice – an acceptable form of injustice, said to temper justice, render it more humane and limit its excesses. But many of the things we call mercy are in fact justice. Often when we ask (or pray) for mercy, we are merely asking not to be subjected to

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42 This essay was written in 1997, save for some minor editing today. Reading it now, a few years later, I find it unnecessarily aggressive in tone. I was obviously angry for personal reasons at the time of its writing. Nevertheless, I see no point in toning it down today.

injustice, i.e. to undeserved suffering or deprivation of well-being.

Justice is giving a person his due, either rewarding his virtues or punishing his vices. Asking (or praying) for either of these things is strictly-speaking not a request for mercy, but a demand for justice.

So, what is mercy? A greater reward than that due (i.e. a gift) or a lesser punishment than that due (i.e. partly or wholly forgiving or healing after punishing). In the positive case, no real harm done – provided the due rewards of others are not diminished thereby. In the negative case, no real harm done – provided there were no victims to the crime.

An excess of mercy would be injustice. Insufficient punishment of a criminal is an injustice to victim(s) of the crime. Dishing out gifts without regard to who deserves what implies an unjust system.

But in any case, this initial view of moral law is incomplete. Retribution of crime is a very imperfect form of justice. True justice is not mere punishment of criminals after the vile deed is done, but *prevention* of the crime. Our indignation toward God or a social/political/judicial system stems not merely from the fact that criminals often remain unpunished and their victims unavenged, but from the fact that the crime was at all allowed to be perpetrated when it could have been inhibited. In the case of the fallible and ignorant human protectors of justice, this is sometimes (though not always) inevitable, so they can be

excused. But in the case of God, who is all-knowing and all-powerful, this is a source of great distress and doubt to those who love justice.

There are, we usually say, two kinds of crime: those with victims and those without. The latter include crimes whose victim is the criminal himself (they are his own problem), or eventually crimes against God (who, being essentially immune to harm, and in any case quite capable of defending His own interests, need not deeply concern us here). With regard to crimes with victims, our concern is with humans or animals wrongfully hurt in some way. The harm may be direct/personal (physical and/or mental – or in relation to relatives or property, which ultimately signify mental and/or physical harm to self) or indirect/impersonal (on the environment or on society – but these too ultimately signify an impact on people or animals).

A truly just world system would require God's prevention of all crime with innocent victims, at least – which He does not in fact do, judging by all empirical evidence, which is why many people honestly doubt His justice or His existence. To say (as some people do) that the failure to prevent undeserved harm of innocents is mercy towards the criminals, giving them a chance to repent, is a very unsatisfying response. It doesn't sound so nice when you consider that it was 'unmerciful' (i.e. *unjust*) to the victims: they were given no chance. Perhaps, then, if not

in a context of prevention, the concept of mercy has some place in the context of *ex post facto* non-retribution.

Avenging the victims of crime seems like a rather useless, emotional response – too late, if the victim is irreversibly harmed (maimed, killed, etc.). If the victim were not irreversibly harmed, his restoration and compensation would seem the most important thing, preferably at the expense of the criminal. But we know that vengeance also to some degree serves preventive purpose: discouraging similar acts by other potential criminals (raising the eventual price of crime for them) or educating actual criminals (so they hopefully do not repeat their misdeeds). To be 'merciful' to actual criminals with victims is therefore not merely to abstain from a useless emotional response, but to participate in eventual repetitions, of similar crimes by the same criminal or others like him.

It must be stressed that taking into account extenuating circumstances is not an act of mercy, but definitely an act of justice. Not to take into account the full context in formulating a judgment is stupidity and injustice. Perhaps the concept of mercy was constructed only to combat imperfectly constructed judicial systems, incapable of distinguishing between nuances of motive and forces. The law says so and so without making distinctions and is to be applied blindly without variation – therefore, 'mercy', an apparently 'irrational' exception to the law, is necessary! It would not be necessary if the law were more precisely and realistically formulated. Thusly, as well for

allegedly Divine law systems as for admittedly human law systems. If the system and those who apply it are narrow-minded and inhumane, of course you need 'mercy' – but otherwise, not.

Another way the concept of mercy is used is in wish or prayer. We hope that the 'powers that be' (Divine or human) will indeed give us our due, rewarding our good efforts or preventing or punishing our enemies' evil deeds, even though this is not always the case in this imperfect world. Such calls to mercy are a form of *realpolitik* – they are not really calls for injustice, but calls for justice clothed in humble words designed to avoid a more fundamental and explicit criticism the failure of true justice of the powers-that-be. Again, if absolute justice were instituted, there would be no need for such appeals to 'mercy'; the right would be automatically done. Well, human justice is inevitably deficient: even with the best of intention and will, people are neither omniscient nor infallible, so uncertainty and even error are inevitable, and in such context 'mercy' is perhaps a useful concept.

But in the case of God, what excuses can we give? How can we justify for Him the imperfection of the world? We try to do so with reference to freewill – justice presupposes responsibility, which presupposes freedom of choice. But this argument is not fully convincing, for we can dig deeper and say: if the world *couldn't* be made just, why was it made *at all*? Or if it had to be made, why not a world of universal and unvarying bliss – who ever said that

freewill was required? For this question there seems to be no answer, and it is the ultimate basis of the complaint of theodicy. The counter-claims of ultimate justice – causes of seemingly unjust reward or punishment invisible to humans, balancing of accounts later or in a reincarnation or in an afterlife – seem lame too. If justice is invisible it is also unjust, and justice later is too late since for the intervening time injustice is allowed to exist. So we are left perplex.

Even when we see two equally good men unequally treated, one rewarded as he deserves and the other given better than he deserves, or two equally bad men unequally mistreated, our sense of justice is piqued. All the more so when the one with more free gifts is less deserving than the one with less free gifts. And all the more so still when the bad is not only not punished but given gifts and the good not only not rewarded but mistreated. For then all effort toward the good and away from the bad is devaluated and rendered vain. If there is no logic in the system of payment, then what incentives have we? Certainly, the resultant effect is not to marvel at the love and mercy of the payer, but rather at the injustice and lack of love that such chaotic distribution implies.

Perhaps then we should ask – what is good and what is bad? Perhaps it is our misconception of these things that gives us a false sense that injustice roams the world. The way to answer that is to turn the question around, and ask: should we construct our concepts of good and bad

empirically, by simply judging as good all actions which seem to result in rewards and bad all actions which seem to result in punishment (the 'market' value of good or bad)? Such a pragmatic approach (which some people find convenient, until they bear the brunt of it themselves) is surely contrary to humanity's intuitions. For in such case, criminals become defenders of justice (*justiciers*) and victimization should always be a source of rejoicing for us. This is the antithesis of morality, which is based on human compassion towards those who suffer indignities and indignation towards those who commit indecencies. These intuitions must be respected and supported, against all claims of religion or ideology or special interests.

Some say there are no innocent victims – implying (for example) that even those who perished in the Holocaust must have been guilty of some *commensurate* crime, in a previous lifetime if not in the current one. Some say there are no culprits – for instance, many Buddhists apparently hold this view, with reference to karmic law. These propositions are two sides of the same coin. As soon as you have a doctrine of perfect justice, divine or natural, you stumble into this pitfall. Only by admitting the imperfection of justice in the world can we become sensitive to the undeserved sufferings of people (others' or one's own).

## 5. The formlessness of God

Finally, I would like to share an insight I recently had at the synagogue, an aspect of "emptiness" not previously discussed by me. The God of Judaism, and more broadly of similarly monotheistic religions, is absolutely ***formless*** – which means, devoid of any shape or form, devoid of any sensible or phenomenal characteristics. (More precisely, this God is conceived as *having* no phenomenal characters, but as quite able to *produce* them.) How then is He to be at all known by us mere mortals?

Standing in worship, I gratefully realize that I am not projecting any *image* of God, since I have none, none having been taught or allowed to me. The God that I (as a Jew) celebrate is formless, very similar in that respect to the "emptiness" presumed by Buddhists to be the root and essence of all existence. Observing myself thinking of God, I note an effort of "intuition," an intention to see through the material and mental world of appearance and to some degree apprehend the formless Existent that I assume to be present.

Thus, "knowledge" of God by us is based on an analogy or a generalization, from the intuition of one's own self. By abstraction from my own self, I can conceive of other people's selves and of the Self of God. If we attribute to God powers like cognition, volition and valuation and affection, in their extreme forms (as omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect justice and mercy, utter

kindness), it is because we have inner consciousness of such powers (in miniature degrees) in ourselves. Our philosophical concept of God is not a conceptual construction derived from experience of Nature, i.e. based on *concrete* appearances and *causation*, but a product of introspection.

Some might argue that just as our soul has or inhabits a body, God may well inhabit the world (pantheism, animism) or be incarnated in it in human form (Hinduism, some branches of Buddhism, and Christianity have this belief) or be symbolized and represented by inanimate images, i.e. statues or drawings (this is called idolatry by Judaism, Islam and some branches of Christianity).

According to those who reject it, the fault of ***idolatry*** (the word is etymologically rooted in Gr. *eidos* = form) is to ignore the inner source of concepts of divinity, and to misdirect people's attention onto physical or mental images, i.e. on phenomenal characters. Just as it is foolish to identify oneself with one's body or imaginations, so God cannot be equated to or known through a form. Granting theism (which of course remains open to debate), the psychological advantage of monotheism is precisely its focus on the formless.

With regard to the concept of ***incarnation*** of God, which is central to many developed religions, I personally find it unconscionable: I do not see how the immensity of God can simultaneously *be* (and not merely *project* into the world) someone or something so small as a person or an

inanimate form. Consider too our tiny size relative to that of the universe; and speculate on the possible infinitesimal size of our universe relative to the infinity of its Creator. Conversely, the apotheosis or deification of a human or animal is in my view unthinkable: a part cannot become the whole. But of course, that may just be my Jewish education; each one is free to think as they see fit. I am not interested in promoting religious intolerance or conflicts, but only seek to clarify concepts and debate issues as a philosopher.

What I want to point out here is that the analogy between God and human soul is commonly regarded as having limits. For whereas most theists (though not necessarily animists or pantheists) consider God as creating the material and mental natural world, most believers in a human soul do not consider that soul as *creating* the body associated with it. The soul may be assumed an outcome of the body (as in naturalism, where soul cannot exist without body) and/or an inhabitant of it (as in certain religions, where soul may leave body), with some degree of control over the body and influence from the body, but it is not assumed to produce the body. On the other hand, one of the main reasons that God is posited, in the monotheistic world-view (rightly or wrongly), is to fulfill the role of first cause and prime mover of the natural world.

All such discussions are of course considered irrelevant by naturalists, many Buddhists, and other atheists. But rather

than come to some doctrinaire conclusion on topics so speculative, I think the important thing is to keep an open mind and focus on comprehending all aspects, nuances and options.

# 4. CHAPTER FOUR

Drawn from *Volition and Allied Causal Concepts* (2004), Chapters 1:1, 2:1-4, 15:2 (part) and 15:3.

## CAUSATION, VOLITION AND GOD

### 1. Causation and volition

By the term ***Causality***, we refer to the relation between a *cause* and an *effect*. Without attempting from the outset to define the causal relation, which we apparently all have some sort of insight into, we may nevertheless notionally distinguish two primary and radically different expressions of it, or genera, which we shall call Causation and Volition. The study of these matters may be labeled ‘aetiology’.

Causality is, note well, *a relation* of some sort between two or more individual things or kinds of things[43]. If two things are not related by causation or volition, they are said to be 'not causally related' – without intention to exclude the possibility that each might have one or the other causal relation to certain other things. The notion of Spontaneity, which refers to events thought to be uncaused by *anything* else, will be considered later.

'Causation' is the term that we shall apply to *deterministic causality*, which may be loosely described as the causal relation between 'natural' things, qualities or events, which 'makes' them, individually or collectively, behave with certain regularities of conjunction or separation. A cause in causation may be called a 'causative'.

This *natural* form of causality is definable with relative ease, *with reference to conditional propositions* of various types and forms. We tacitly understand the different forms of natural, temporal, extensional and logical conditioning as being expressions of an underlying 'bond', which we label causality, or more specifically causation. The patterns of behavior of things are empirically, and then

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[43] The Latin root *causa* refers to a purpose or motive, but I am not sure what its deeper etymology might be. A related Latin term is *causari*, meaning quarrel or dispute. Related terms in French are *une cause* (a court case), *causer* (to converse) and maybe *chose* (thing); in a legal context, the thing that causes, i.e. the cause, is sought through discussion about it. The etymological issue is just one aspect of the history of *the concept* of cause in all its guises, which has yet to be written.

inductively or deductively, identifiable[44]; the underlying causal 'bond' is a widespread intuitive assumption which requires much philosophical work to elucidate and validate.

The idea of causation may be viewed as arising from the three 'laws of thought', insofar as the latter establish the fundamental "if–then" relations, as in "if X, then X" (identity), "if X, then not notX" (non-contradiction) and "if not X, then notX" (exclusion of a middle), which mean "X and notX together are impossible" and "not X and not notX together are impossible". For, once such relations are found to exist in the world and in discourse, i.e. in all the modes of modality, with regard to any term X and its negation notX, it becomes conceivable that similar relations may be observed to exist *in less obvious* cases, between certain other pairs of terms, like X and Y.

'Volition' is the term we shall apply to *indeterministic causality*, which may be loosely described as the causal relation between an agent and any action thereof, i.e. between a 'person' (be it God, a human being or an animal) and his[45] will (be it a personal attitude or a mental

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44 See my work *Future Logic*, parts III and IV, for a thorough analysis of conditioning.

45 I will use the pronoun 'he', for the sake of brevity and readability, in a general sense, meaning He (God), he/she (a human being) or it (an animal) – i.e. any 'person', any entity capable of being an agent, who has the power of will. I do not by this terminology intend to express an opinion as to whether all animals have 'personality'; perhaps only the higher animals

or physical motion of some sort). Note well that in volition per se, the 'cause' is the one who wills (at the precise time of willing), an entity called the agent or actor or doer, and the 'effect' is a specific act of will by that agent immediately, or thereafter more remotely any product thereof (which may or not have been intended).

This *personal* form of causality is far less easy to define. The simplest approach is by negation – to affirm that there is a causal 'bond' of some sort, while denying that it takes the form of natural, temporal, extensional or logical conditioning. Thus, volition refers to behavior which does not display fixed patterns, but in which we all nevertheless intuit a punctual causality. Indeed, we ought to say that the notion of a 'bond' is primarily due to the inner sense of will; it is then by analogy broadened, to include the 'bonds' between events external to the will. This seems

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do, but not insects or bacteria. I only wish to make allowance for the possibility, not exclude it offhand. Likewise, with regard to God – I do not, by mentioning Him, intend to express religious views. Even in the case of humans, no doctrine is intended here that all their actions are volitional. (Animists, by the way, would regard even stones as having some measure of will; some 19th Cent. German philosophers spoke romantically of the Will as a sort of general force of Nature.) Our essential object of study, here, is the abstract fact of volition or agency, and not so much its particular (real or assumed) concretizations. All this will become clear later when we discuss the natural limits of volition.

true for the individual, and presumably in the history of thought[46].

The development of this fundamental, common notion of causal bond from the will to natural events proceeds as follows: whatever remains evidently unaffected by our efforts, no matter what anyone wills, is regarded as naturally 'stuck together' or 'connected'. Thus, whereas volition may be defined in part by denial of the forms of natural causality (conditioning), causation is in turn

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[46] It does seem – though much research would be needed to establish it indubitably as historical fact – that mankind initially explained (as of when it sought explanations) all natural motions anthropomorphically with reference to volition rather than causation. That seems to be one thrust of animist belief, which projects local spirits, genies or gods into rivers, the soil, fire, the sky and other objects (including abstract ones, by the way – e.g. assigning a spirit to the tribe) to explain their movements. Magic and ritual were used to tame or at least deflect these 'forces of nature'. Modern philosophers, of course, are trying to do the opposite, i.e. to somehow explain volition with reference to causation or some similarly impersonal process. Nevertheless, traces of underlying 'naturism' unconsciously subsist in the common reference, even in scientific discourse, to a personified Nature that 'does' things as if it has 'ends' and that makes 'laws'. This can also be viewed as a sort of secularized theism, which masks its identity by seeming to de-personify God. Of course, even the concepts of spirit and will are not innate; they must have a long and complex history, within and before mankind. Since their emergence probably antedates oral or written works of religion, philosophy or literature, we must examine archeological evidence (such as prehistoric funerary practices or ritual objects) to guess when and how they may have developed.

defined in part by denial of the power of personal causality.[47]

Natural or deterministic causality displays patterns, accessible directly or indirectly by empirical means (they proceed from concrete perceptions, which are then generalized; or inferences from such), but its underlying bonding aspect is known only by analogy, as a conceptual development. Personal or indeterministic causality, on the other hand, is grasped first empirically (in the way of an intuited abstraction, through an inner 'sense' of oneself willing), and then formally distinguished by denial of ultimate invariability.

Note again that causality is essentially *a relation*. Since we do not perceive the relation but only at best its terms, it is not phenomenal; i.e. it has no material sensible qualities or mental equivalents of such. It is apprehended by us, as already suggested, through intuition during acts of volition, and inferred by analogy (a conceptual act) to exist similarly in causation. It is thus better characterized as an abstraction.

The statistical aspect of causation – and, by negation, that in volition – is secondary, though also a relational aspect. The latter is ontologically a mere expression of the relation, and epistemologically a way for us to discern and

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[47] Pitting Nature and Persons against each other, as it were: if the former wins, we have causation; if the latter, we have volition.

classify the causality. Whether the underlying relation is, or ought to be believed to be, a real ‘substance’, or whether it is a convenient projection of the imagination, is a moot question. But pragmatically speaking it is not very important, if at all possible, to find the answer.

An interesting distinction between deterministic and indeterministic causality is that individual connections are known in the former case solely *by virtue of* general connections, whereas in the latter case they are known *per se*.

- That is to say, causation involves natural laws or uniformities[48]: it is from our knowledge that one *kind of* thing causes another *kind of* thing that we know that an *instance* of the first kind of thing has caused an *instance* of the second kind of thing.[49]

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[48] The insight that causation concerns kinds rather than instances may be attributed to Hart and Honoré; at least, I learned it from their work. It explains why the reasoning “*post hoc, ergo propter hoc*” (after this, therefore because of this) is fallacious: it is just *too hasty*. We do infer (inductively, by generalization) kinds from instances, before inferring (deductively, syllogistically) instances from kinds – but we must always remain aware of possible exceptions (inductive evidence for particularization).

[49] It would be erroneous to infer that every individual causative relation presupposes a universal one: the proposition “this X causes Y” seems superficially singular; but in practice, it means that the individual entity X always causes the *kind of* event Y (when it encounters some unstated *kind of* entity or circumstance, Z); for this reason, this singular form need not imply the broader “all X cause Y”. But that just confirms that

- In contrast, in volition we cannot refer to induced or deduced generalities of that sort to establish a causal connection between agent and will, since by definition such connection is always *singular and unpredictable*.[50]

As with any other concept, the concept of will ought not be regarded as devoid of terms and conditions ("terms" here referring to the ontological identities of the surrounding entities, and "conditions" to their current temporal and spatial alignments, and their states and motions). The indeterminism of volition is always bound and circumscribed by the determinism of certain terms and

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truly 'singular causation' is a doubtful concept. At first sight, quantity is not the essential issue in causation; if a 'universal' (or kind) has but one instance, then its causation of something else might also be singular! But the issue is: how would we know about it? Are propositions of the form "if this singular event, then that other singular event; if *not* this singular event, then *not* that singular event" knowable? All we would have, surely, is an observation of the presence of this and that together, preceded and followed by an observation of the absence of both. Such conjunctions would not suffice to construct conditional propositions, which refer to *negations of* conjunctions! (For logicians, I would add: material implications are unknowable except through strict implications.)

[50] For this reason, the argument "*post hoc, ergo propter hoc*" is often used with apparent legitimacy in the field of volition (as against causation). In such cases, the underlying logic is in fact *adductive*, rather than deductive. The singular cause is assumed hypothetically, so long as it seems to fit available data – though such judgment may be reversed if new data puts it in doubt.

conditions, i.e. by causative factors. A power of volition does not mean omnipotence, total power to do just anything; it is an allowance for a limited range of two or more possible effects, whose cause is not a causative but an agent. The oft-used expression "causes and conditions" is usually intended to mean "volitions and causations", i.e. volitional causes and surrounding causative conditions.

Volition seems closely allied to consciousness. The range of an organism's volitional powers apparently depends on the range of its powers of cognition. Animals with simple organs of sensation have simple organs of movement. More complex sensory systems allow for proportionately more complex motor systems.

Evidently, each entity has its own 'nature', its own naturally given facilities and constraints, to be actualized directly or indirectly. For each entity, some things are 'willable', but some are not. Some things can be willed in certain circumstances, but not in others. Some things are easily willed at a given time, while at other times only with great difficulty.

Different species have different ranges in relation to each activity. Man can do things flies cannot, like invent a rocket to the moon. Flies can do things men cannot, like fly around without machines. Similarly, within each species, individuals vary in their range. I can do things you cannot do, however much you try, and vice-versa; though we also have many abilities in common. Yet even these

common powers may differ slightly: you can perhaps run faster than I, etc.

## 2. Necessity and inertia in causation

Pursuing the analysis of causation and volition, we must consider intermediate or allied relationships which relate together these two domains of causality. For deeper description of causation, the reader is referred to my *The Logic of Causation*[51].

In natural causality or determinism, we must distinguish between *necessary causation* and *inertial causation*.

Our understanding of the term 'nature' refers primarily to ***necessary*** relations, such that no matter what else happens in the world, that particular sequence of two things is bound to happen, i.e. once the one arises, the other is bound to also arise. The specifics may vary from case to case, with regard to time (the sequence may be simultaneous or at a set time after or some time later), place (here, there) and other respects; but the correlation is inflexible. Most of the causative events in the world proceed thus, relentlessly, as inevitable and invariable courses of events that no other natural event and all the

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[51] The reader ought to read that book first, to fully understand the present work. At least, the summary chapters (10 and 16) should be looked at.

more no volition (or at least no human or animal volition) can prevent or in any way deviate. For example, the Sun's evolution and trajectory are de facto out of our power to interfere with.

On the other hand, it seems, some causative sequences are avoidable or subject to volitional manipulation. Such natural courses of events may be characterized as ***inertial***. They are strictly speaking *conditional* causation, i.e. sequences that are bound to occur *provided no* volitional (human or animal – or eventually Divine) intervention occurs. For example, the river Nile would have continued to flood over yearly, had people not built a dam at Aswan. Or again, closer to home, my breath continues rhythmically, if I do not willfully hold it or change its rhythm.

Thus, whereas the concept of necessary nature concerns causation alone, the concept of inertial nature refers to an interface between causation and volition. When volition does intervene in the course of nature, we say that an ***artificial*** event has replaced the inertial event. The artificial event is of course 'natural' in a larger sense – a natural potential; but it is a potential that will never actualize without volitional intervention. For example, a piece of clay will never become a pot by mere erosion.

We would express causation in formal terms as (in its strongest determination): "**If X occurs, then Y occurs;**

**and if X does not occur, then Y does not occur**"[52]. Weaker relations are definable with reference to compounds, replacing 'X' by 'X1 and X2 and X3...' and 'Y' by 'Y1 or Y2 or Y3...' as the case may be.[53]

When volition ***interferes***, simply one of the causal factors – be it the whole 'X' (as rarely happens) or a part 'X1' – refers to the volitional act, and the rest 'X2', 'X3', etc. (if any) constitutes natural ingredients and forces[54], and the effect is an artificial event 'Y'. In such cases, the conditional "if X, then Y" or "if X1, plus X2 etc., then Y" is operative.

When volition ***abstains***, the preceding volitional causal factor is negated, i.e. 'not X' or 'not X1' is true, and natural causal factors come to the fore, i.e. 'X2' etc.,

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[52] The negative aspect of this definition is as important as the positive, note well. David Hume's reference to the "constant conjunction" between cause and effect is not by itself sufficient: absence of cause and absence of effect must also be found conjoined (in the strongest case). For a full critique of Hume's views, see my *Phenomenology*, chapter II-5.

[53] But see my *The Logic of Causation* for precise description of all possible cases. The strongest determination is complete-necessary causation. But in addition to that, there are weaker determinations, namely complete-contingent, partial-necessary, and partial-contingent causations. Volition can be fit into any one of these as a complete or partial cause, whether necessary or contingent.

[54] In the case "if X, then Y", we may consider 'nature' as expressed in the if–then connection between X and Y. In the case "if X1 and X2 etc., then Y", the role of 'nature' is implied in both the other partial causes (X2, etc) and the connection.

resulting in an inertial event, ‘not Y’. In such case, the conditional “if not X, then not Y” or “if notX1, plus X2 etc., then not Y” is operative.

Thus, there is nothing antinomian about causative relations involving volition at some stage. The event willed, *once willed, acts like any other* causative, complete or partial, necessary or contingent, within the causative complex concerned. The only difference being that this causative did not emerge from natural processes, but from volition.

It should be noted that *volition, unlike causation, is not (or rather, not entirely[55]) formally definable with reference to conditional propositions*. That is the main difficulty in the concept of volition, which has baffled so many philosophers.

It is true that if you ask someone to demonstrate to you he has freewill, he will likely answer: “see, if I but will to move my arm, it moves; and if I decide not to, it does not”. But such arguments *ad libitum* (‘at his pleasure’) have little weight, since the antecedents *are* the volitional events we are trying to define or at least prove, and the consequents are merely effects of them (as it happens, in this example, indirect effects, dependent on bodily conditions – but the same can be said of indirect mental effects and even of direct effects within the soul itself).

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55 See next chapter.

Therefore, one may well object to the tested person: “what made you will to move or not move your arm?” Even if the latter attempts to preempt such objection by saying: “whatever I predict I shall will (or not-will), or you tell me to will (or not-will), I can do so”, or better still: “whatever a machine randomly tells me to will (or not-will), I shall do it”, one may still suppose that the instruction given by the human respondent or by the machine becomes a determining causative, rather than a mere suggestion, in the mind of the tested person. In that case, the apparent act of volition would only be a mechanical effect of such instruction.

Thus, conditional propositions cannot be used to define or even prove volition, without tautology or circularity or infinite regression or paradox. This does *not* however logically imply that volition does not exist[56]. There may well be other ways to define or at least prove it. We can still minimally each refer to his intuitive experience of personal will, as source and confirmation of the concept.

Note that *the dividing line between necessity and inertia may shift over time*. Some feats are de facto out of our power one day, and later become feasible (for example, walking on the moon was until recently in fact impossible). Or the opposite may occur: something at first possible to us becomes impossible at a later time (for

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[56] Contrary to the claims of philosophers such as Gilbert Ryle.

example, certain damages to the brain make the victim lose many cognitive and motor powers). Necessity may be permanent or temporary, acquired or lost; and so with inertia.

The '*not yet possible*' is so due to time-constraints: there may be physical, psychological or cognitive/intellectual impediments to overcome before the necessary factors can be lined up; once it occurs or is brought about, we admit it as having always been possible 'in principle' though not immediately. The '*no longer possible*' is so due to the irreversible destruction of some faculty or the erection of some impassable barrier, or to lost opportunity; what was previously possible, since the beginning of or during the existence of the entity or entities concerned, has become impossible. Thus, what is causative necessity at one time may be mere inertia at another, and vice versa.

Also, of course, the powers of different individuals of a given species, or of different species, differ. Consequently, what is necessity *relative to* one individual or species, is mere inertia to another; and vice versa. Nevertheless, at any given time and place, we can state as absolute principle either that no human or animal is in fact capable of affecting a certain natural course of events (so that that course is necessary), or that some specified individuals of some specified group have the volitional power to do so if they so choose (so that the course is inertial). The same distinction between necessity and inertia can be used to harmonize our assumptions of God's

all-powerful volition and of causation in nature (see below).

With regard to the epistemological underpinning of the above ontological statements, it should be stressed that our knowledge of causation is *inductively* acquired.

The proposition "If X is followed by Y, then X causes Y" may logically be assumed to be true, especially if the X+Y combination is repeatedly found to occur, until and unless it is found that X is sometimes *not* followed by Y. In other words, the movement of thought known as *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (meaning "after this, therefore because of this"), though deductively a fallacy, is not fallacious in itself but only in view of a larger context. The observed sequence "X is followed by Y", like any empirical datum, may be regarded as a basis for generalization, provided it is understood that the generality "X causes Y" may require eventual particularization if further experience suggests it[57]. Gradual adjustment of such generalizations allows us to identify more complex conditions and more variable causal relations.

The relationship between necessary and inertial causation is thus one of generality and (relative) particularity,

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[57] In terms of factorial analysis: "X causes Y" is the strongest factor of "X is followed by Y", though we may have to downgrade in the face of new evidence. Symbolically: $\mathbf{I} \rightarrow \mathbf{A}_n$ until if ever **O** appears. See my *Future Logic,* part VI. Contra Hume's allegations, this principle is undeniable, since any such denial would perforce be making use of it.

respectively. They are two levels of generalization, differing only in degree. The first is an optimistic upward thrust to the extreme, yielding an apparent absolute; the second is a downward correction of that to a more relative status, in view of evident volitional access. They are both inductive; but one has remained unconditional, whereas the other has been judged conditional upon non-exercise of volition.

### 3. Direct and indirect volition

Another interface between the domains of volition and causation is brought out with reference to the distinction between *direct volition* and *indirect volition*. At this stage, we need only treat these terms superficially; they will be further clarified further on.

In direct volition, whether immediate or far-reaching, the effect is inevitable; i.e. that which is willed occurs irrespective of surrounding circumstances. In indirect volition, the effect is a later product of direct volition, dependent on the appropriate circumstances being present. Something directly willed may be attributed exclusively the agent, because causation is not involved in it at all; or if it is involved, it has the strongest determination, i.e. it is complete and necessary causation. Something indirectly willed has mixed parentage: although the motion in that direction is initiated by the agent, its exact course

thereafter may vary according the terms and conditions it encounters in its onward journey; i.e. partial and/or contingent causation is involved somewhere along the line.

The causal relation between an agent and what he wills is, strictly speaking, direct, if what he wills automatically and invariably follows his willing it (whether immediately in time or not): the consequence is inevitable, whatever happens in nature thereafter and whatever anyone does in an attempt to interfere. Indirect volition refers to a weaker bond, which is actually a sequence of two causal events: (a) a direct volition, followed by (b) a conditional causation. In such case, the thing willed does not invariably or automatically follow the willing of it, for the simple reason that subsequent natural events or other volitions may in the meantime interfere and prevent the full realization that the volition was directed at.

As the formal notation for volition, we may use "**A wills W**", to mean "agent A wills action W", so as to abide by the familiar subject-copula-predicate schema. This is not mere convention, but serves to imply that the relationship itself ('willing') is uniform in all its occurrences, and that what gives every specific act of will its particularity is the agent doing it (A) and the direction or result of the action (W).

Note that although the word 'wills' is used, to explicitly indicate the involvement of will, in practice other words are of course used, in which the fact of will is tacit. The

words ‘do’ or ‘make’ or ‘produce’, for instances, are common; but they are ambiguous in that they are not always indicative of volition. Mostly, rather than the two words “wills W”, we would have a specific one-word verb in the form “*Ws*”; for examples, ‘walks’, ‘sings’, ‘thinks’ or ‘hopes’, rather than ‘wills walking’, ‘wills hoping’, etc.

We may distinguish between acts of will proper, and the absence of such acts. In more formal terms, this refers to a distinction between “**A wills notW**” and “**A does not will W**”, although sometimes in practice the dividing line is moot (depending as it does on the degree of consciousness involved). These – willing and not-willing – are two significant subclasses of will in the larger sense, which we may label positive and negative will, or activity and passivity, respectively. It should be obvious that not-willing may often be viewed as an act of will of sorts, at least when our inclination is very much to act and we have to *restrain* ourselves from doing so. For this reason, logical considerations relative to will should also be applied *mutadis mutandis* to non-will – for any creature endowed with the power of volition concerned.

To say that A can will W does not necessarily mean that A can will W ***at will***, i.e. directly and immediately; it may be that A can only arrive at W indirectly and over time, ***through a process***, by stages, first willing W1 in certain specific circumstances, then willing W2 in other appropriate circumstances, and so forth… till W occurs. That is, ability in principle does not signify ability without

submission to terms and conditions[58]. The distinction between direct and indirect volition can then be formally expressed as follows.

- Direct volition: "**If A wills W, then W occurs**".
- Indirect volition: "**If A wills W, and conditions X, Y, Z... (or the like) occur in conjunction, naturally or volitionally, then W occurs; but if A wills W and appropriate conditions do not also occur, then W does not occur**".

Thus, in the case of direct volition, that which the will aims at is identical with the outcome of the will ('W' in both cases). Whereas, in the case of indirect volition, the will's aim (whatever makes one call it a will of 'W') is not always identical with the produced effect, call it 'V', because the will put forth is by itself insufficient to guarantee the emergence of 'W' but does so only when and if certain surrounding factors (X, Y, Z…) are duly lined up. Whenever will stirs, it is sure to produce *some* minimal effect V (if only within the agent of it, possibly in the mental or even material surrounds); but that effect (V) may correspond to the will's aim (V=W) or may not

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58 We, of course, exist in a real world, with specific bounds and rules. Wishing something to be 'so' does not make it so; thinking otherwise is madness.

do so (V<>W): if it necessarily does so, the volition may be classified as direct, otherwise it is indirect.[59]

Thus, to repeat, a number of partial causes give rise to W. One of those is the willing of (aimed at) W, in itself a direct volition by the agent. If this happens to find appropriate partial causes as its surrounds (X, Y, Z, … or the like), it will have indirectly produced W. Otherwise, it will produce something else that is not W. The agent may of course be able to arrive at the same goal by means of different direct volitional acts even on the same platform of conditions (and all the more so as conditions vary). For instance, one may travel from point P to point Q in a number of ways.

The required conditions may be natural factors like a functioning nervous and muscular system, or physical or mental factors (like a machine or a guidebook) caused by other acts of will by the same agent or others. So long as they affect the course of events, they are relevant to the volition and its classification as direct or indirect. The conditions may of course be necessary or contingent; i.e. there may be only one set of circumstances that make possible the result in question, or there may be many possible alternatives.

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[59] Note that the term 'V' can be replaced by the disjunction 'V1 *or* V2 *or* V3...' in cases of indirect volition where the effect varies according to unknown or unspecified surrounding factors, i.e. when the factors X, Y, Z… mentioned in the antecedent do not cover all possible causations.

Although we often in practice regard a volition as *effectively* 'direct' if normal conditions (like a healthy body and mind, etc.) are present, *because those inanimate conditions could not without such a will produce such an effect*, strictly speaking it is of course not so if a change of conditions would obstruct or divert it in any way. The intent here is to stress the fundamental distinction between the *activity* of volition and the relative *passivity* of its preconditions.

## 4. Matter-mind and spirit

The compatibility of causation and volition (and likewise natural spontaneity) is undeniable. Nothing precludes that a bit of each exists in our world, in the way of adjacent and interacting domains. Volition is to causation like the holes in Swiss cheese. Causation may apply in most processes, with the exception of a few where volition is applicable.

The distinction between a mechanical 'agent' and an 'agent' in the sense intended within the concept of volition must be clarified. Volition is essentially active, while causation is essentially passive. When we say that an agent of volition does, acts, makes or produces something – we attach special significance to these terms based on introspection. When we use similar terms with reference to causation (e.g. to a machine), their connotation is much

diluted, since in this domain everything occurs in the way of automatic reaction.

When we say of a machine, or even a plant, that it does or causes something, we mean that some quality or motion of it gives rise to some other quality or motion of it (or of something else, possibly building up a new entity thereby). But we do not literally mean that the machine or plant *itself*, even presuming some spontaneity in the coming-to-be of its qualities or motions, has achieved the result. On the other hand, in the case of volition, the person (God, human or animal) *as a unitary whole* somehow from a *static* posture initiates/originates some *change or motion* in his immediate environment, and in some cases from thence further out. It is in this sense that we will here understand the term 'agent': with the underlying concept of *responsibility*.

Whereas in causation cause and effect may be spatially and temporally, as well as conceptually, separate — in volition, the immediate act of will must be considered as occurring within or emanating out of the actor (his self, soul or spirit), and not beyond him in the surrounding mind or brain or wider nervous system or body: such eventual *consequences* of it are not entirely within the power and responsibility of the actor, but depend on other factors, as already explained.

Thus, whereas causation may be viewed as concerned essentially with sequences of events (in the large sense) within the material/physical, mental/imaginative and

psychosomatic world, volition should be viewed as concerning the spiritual world and its interface or interaction with that world of causation or nature. Once volition has injected its choices into the course of nature, it (i.e. nature) carries on – but on a new course; volition thus deviates the flow of causation from another (higher or deeper) plane.

Inertias and conditions are therefore two aspects of the interaction of soul and nature. **Inertias are the way nature goes if volition does not interfere; conditions are the factors of nature that come into play when volition does interfere.** The ones occur in the absence of volition, the others in its presence. Some things (indeed most) are beyond the power of volition to affect – they are classed as within the realm of natural necessity (and possibly, in some cases, as natural spontaneity).

All of which brings us to the causal relation of *Influence*. Under this important concept, we shall (further on) more closely study the ways the agent of will may be affected by natural events or by other agents of will.

## 5. Conceiving Divine volition

If we conceive God as existent and omnipotent, we must regard ***all natural necessities as mere inertias relative to Him***, with the exception of logical necessities (i.e. that facts are facts, that contradictions are impossible, that there is no middle ground between existence and non-existence – and other such self-evident truths, whose contradictories are self-contradictory).

Such a premise does not hinder scientific knowledge, since all our knowledge of natural laws is ultimately based on generalizations from empirical particulars, anyway! To say that God can, if He so chooses, interfere with any natural law, does not imply that God will ever choose to do so. We can argue that it was His will to institute such laws in the first place, even though He left Himself the possibility of exceptional interference[60]. Thus, all natural

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[60] Believers in Divine interference may distinguish between (a) ***miracles***, or manifest interference, those rare cases when interference is specifically known to us (or thought to be), and (b) ***providence***, or hidden interference, the presumed more frequent interference "behind the scenes", i.e. without our specific knowledge (though note that the two words are sometimes intended more generically, one including the other or both the same). But even when God does not interfere, He retains the power to do so; so, in such cases, He exercises restraint. Note that Judaism celebrates both open and concealed Divine interference, respectively at the festivals

necessities relative to all us lesser beings may be considered as effectively necessities, even if we admit that they are strictly speaking inertias that could in principle be abrogated by God's will.

This position must be differentiated from the so-called Occasionalism of philosophers like Al-Ghazali (1059-1111): the latter deny natural causation in favor of universal Divine volition, whereas our position here is to reconcile the two. We do not here claim God to be the direct cause of everything that happens in the world, but only conceive Him as having the power to interfere at will although in the great majority of cases He abstains from its exercise. Al-Ghazali, a Moslem, remains commendable in having repudiated the idea of Avicenna (or Ibn Sina, 980-1037), based on Greek philosophy, that the material world was a *necessary consequence* of God, insisting instead that it was a product of God's *will*. Al-Ghazali thought he had to resort to denial of all natural causation to achieve that refutation; but as shown here, it was an excessive measure.[61]

Many thinkers have turned away from the ideas of Divine creation of and intervention in nature, by the assumption that these ideas logically implied Divine responsibility for all events in the world, denial of natural law and conflict

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Pessach (for instance – see book of Exodus) and at Purim (see book of Esther).

[61] In any case, Al-Ghazali's position is not the same as David Hume's (1711-76), to whom he is often compared; the latter aims to deny all causality.

with human freewill. However, a consistent hypothesis is possible, if we well understand the difference between natural necessity and inertia, as well as that between a direct and an indirect cause. In respect of the latter, it is worth quoting verbatim a passage of my *Buddhist Illogic*[62]:

> "It should be pointed out here that 'creation' does not simply mean causality by God of (the rest of) the universe. The presumed type of causality involved is volition, a free act of will, rather than causation. Furthermore, God is not conceived as the direct cause of everything in the universe, but merely as First Cause and Prime Mover, i.e. as the cause of its initial contents and their initial movement, as well as of the 'laws of nature' governing them. This might be taken to mean, in a modern perspective, the core matter subject to the Big Bang, the ignition of that explosion and the programming of the evolution of nature thereafter, including appearance of elementary particles, atoms of increasing complexity, stars and planets, molecules, living cells, evolution of life forms, organisms with consciousness and will, and so forth (creationism need not be considered tied to a literal Biblical scenario).
>
> Once God has willed (i.e. created) inchoate nature, it continues on its course in accordance with causation, with perhaps room for spontaneous events (as quantum mechanics suggests) and for localized acts of volition

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[62] See chapter 10 there. Bold italics added here for emphasis.

(by people, and perhaps higher animals, when they appear on the scene). As already mentioned, there are degrees of causation; and when something causes some second thing that in turn causes some third thing, it does not follow that the first thing is a cause of the third, and even in cases where it is (thus indirectly) a cause, the degree of causation involved may be diminished in comparison with the preceding link in the chain (dampening). Similarly with volition, ***the cause of a cause may be a lesser cause or not a cause at all. It is therefore inaccurate to regard a First Cause, such as God is conceived to be relative to nature, as being 'cause of everything' lumped together irrespective of process. The succession of causal events and the varieties of causal relations involved, have to be taken into consideration***.

Spontaneity of physical events and freedom of individual (human or animal) volition are not in logical conflict with creation, because they still occur in an existence context created by God. God may well be the indirect cause of spontaneous or individually willed events, in the sense of making them possible, without being their direct cause, in the sense of making them necessary or actualizing them. Furthermore, to affirm creation does not logically require that we regard, as did some Greek philosophers, God as thereafter *forced to* let Nature follow its set course unhindered. It is conceivable that He chooses not to interfere at all; but it is equally conceivable that He chooses to interfere

punctually, occasionally changing the course of things (this would be what we call ‘miracle’, or more broadly ‘providence’), or even at some future time arresting the world altogether. His being the world’s initiator need not incapacitate Him thereafter from getting further involved.

All that I have just described is *conceivable*, i.e. a consistent theory of creation, but this does not mean that it is definitely *proven*, i.e. deductively self-evident or inductively the only acceptable vision of things in the context of all available empirical data. Note well that I am not trying to give unconditional support to religious dogmas of any sort. Rather, I am reacting to the pretensions of many so-called scientists today, who (based on very simplistic ideas of causality and causal logic) claim that they have definitely *disproved* creation, or who like Nagarjuna claim that it is logically *not even thinkable*. Such dogmas are not genuine philosophy. One should never let oneself be intimidated by either priestly or academic prestige, but always remain open-minded and consider facts and arguments impartially and fairly.”

## 6. Spiritual Darwinism

Can Darwinism, properly conceived (and not as some have historically misconstrued it), assist the humanities (i.e. ethical, social, economic and political discourse)? The time frame of biological evolution is very long, very much longer than the span of human history. The humanities mainly draw on the latter for their empirical data, to predict what forms of social behavior and organization are likely to bring good or bad to individual humans, human groups or humanity as a whole. The survival of the human (and other) species is a legitimate standard of judgment for the humanities, drawn from biology. But within that broad framework, many conjectures are possible, between which we can only judge with reference to history, if only approximately. Many questions faced by humanity remain unanswerable, whether we look to biology or to history, for the simple reason that they deal with novel issues that have no precedent in the past.

In any case, we have seen in the present work the *specificity* of human beings, in terms of their degree of consciousness and volition compared to other animals. These two differentia are radical enough to suggest that whatever conclusions biology may come to with respect to life in general, it has to reconsider them very carefully when trying to apply them specifically to *homo sapiens*. A species that displays such major distinctions is bound to

be subject to some more specific, less mechanistic biological considerations. Our fate cannot be left to chance. If humans have the power of choice, then their nature is to refer to ethical discourse, to help them decide in a pondered manner what courses to follow.

It is important in this context to understand the term ‘survival’ in a large and deep sense. Ultimately, it does not just mean *physical* continuity at all costs; this is only minimal survival. There are greater degrees of survival, ranging from physical health up through psychological wellbeing to spiritual life. The human being, especially, is no mere body, but a largely mental and spiritual entity. Mankind is not just driven by matter, but has other, seemingly ‘higher’ considerations. Consequently, *the standards* of success or failure may be different for humans than for other species.

A person may succeed materially but woefully fail in other dimensions of his or her being. Another may fail in the material domain yet succeed in the intellectual or spiritual domain. Who is ‘better off’? If we insist on applying ‘genetic perpetuation’ as the only conceivable biological norm, we will prefer the first. But if we allow that at the human level of existence other issues may be involved, we may prefer the second. The fact is, many people are no longer subject to the reproductive instinct, and choose to have sex lives without begetting children, or to become monks or nuns.

Physically, they are naturally selected out; but what does that prove? Perhaps some of the latter function on another evolutionary scale, wherein it is not the genes that matter most but the soul. Perhaps genes only exist to eventually give rise to souls, or as vehicles for souls. The materialist interpretation of things is not necessarily the final word. I mean, from an ethical point of view, it is just a doctrine like any other.

It could be argued, in accord with the biological principle of evolution, that the soul 'evolved' in certain forms of living organism, as *an instrument* of the body, improving the body's chances of survival and reproduction. In a materialist perspective, 'spiritual philosophy' may then be considered as an aberration, whereby the tool (the soul) has forgotten its original function and acquired the pretension that it is life's goal and that the body must serve it. But it is equally conceivable that, once the soul appeared on the biological scene, it surpassed all other considerations in the material pursuits of the organisms that had one.

The latter perspective might be characterized as 'Spiritual Darwinism' – or as *the salvation of the morally fittest* – a doctrine diametrically opposed to that of historical 'Social Darwinism', which refers to the physical or political dominion of thugs. If we reflect, the spiritual principle of salvation of the morally fittest is nothing new; it has always been the basis of spiritual philosophies like Judaism or Buddhism. Some people advance on the

spiritual path, and some are left behind or regress. Some people make the effort to evolve spiritually and are 'saved' or 'enlightened'; others refuse to use their life constructively, and remain in darkness or sink further down. So it goes – and few, very few, find their way to true 'survival' – i.e. 'eternal life'.

## 7. Theological perspectives

Some observers, mostly out of religious motives, do resist the conclusion that there is evolution of species. They point to extreme mathematical improbabilities (approaching zero) of the proposed 'changes' taking place in the time paleontology makes available for them. They also offer statistical arguments against the possibility of life originating spontaneously by random combinations of molecules, in the first half to one billion or even full 4.6 billion years of the earth, or even the roughly 15 billion years of the universe. Furthermore, they argue that the alignment of astronomical and specifically earthly physical conditions necessary for life to emerge was too improbable for chance to be claimed.[63]

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[63] Whence, it is concluded that some Divine intervention must have been necessary – to load the dice sufficiently, as it were. I am not competent to judge the mathematics involved; but if it is correct, the miraculous conclusion would seem justified, until and unless some more natural explanation is

Such mathematical objections are certainly impressive, at least to a layman like me. One could for a start retort that the improbable is not quite impossible. Moreover, it may be that there are as yet undiscovered natural processes, or laws of nature, that would significantly reduce mathematical improbabilities once factored into their equations. Before rushing to a non-naturalist conclusion, however satisfying, it would seem to me wise (more in accord with inductive logic) to search for such missing data or laws.[64]

Objectors also contend that the paleontological record still has many significant gaps – and that till such 'missing links' are found, any such conclusion would be premature. They argue that the existence of such apparent discontinuities after over a hundred years of extensive research could be regarded as evidence of real discontinuity.

But with regard to evolutionary transition, these critics give no natural explanation as to how new species might appear without gradually emerging by procreation from previous species. To me, evolutionary continuity is more

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eventually proposed. See for instance Schroeder, or the much earlier *Proceedings* of the Associations of Orthodox Jewish Scientists.

[64] There is no particular reason to expect God to intervene in a grandiose public manner in the course of nature. Rather, in my opinion, some sort of naturalist conclusion is to be expected and persistently sought.

credible than discontinuity, because it is easier to explain missing links by the reasonable suppositions that (a) the populations of missing species were perhaps relatively small and short-lived, (b) the traces of most living specimens have been destroyed by natural processes over time, and (c) most of the few extant traces are too dispersed and well concealed to have been found – than to try and otherwise explain the observed abrupt appearance of fossils of numerous new species.

Such critics do not propose a hypothesis about jumps from one life form to the next by ordinary reproduction or other natural processes, but one of successive species creations; i.e. they appeal to ongoing miracles long after the initial Creation of the world. So, although their criticism of gradualism is in principle acceptable to naturalists insofar as there are unanswered questions (viz. the missing links), their suggestion of miraculous change is understandably not well received. It lacks weight, not because of atheistic prejudice, but because it is methodologically weak, since a simpler hypothesis (small and ephemeral populations, and destruction, dispersion and concealment of traces) does exist.

Certainly, modern biologists actively address the question and openly debate the issues. They consider four or five patterns of change, based on the fossil record, namely "phyletic change" (gradual "change within a single lineage of organisms"), "cladogenesis" ("splitting of lineages" based on the "founder effect"), "adaptive

radiation" ("sudden – in geologic time – diversification… associated with the opening up of new biological frontiers"), and "punctuated equilibria" (based on "allopatric speciation"), as well as extinction. The theories proposed by Ernst Mayr, George Gaylord Simpson, Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould, and Steven M. Stanley, are all intended to provide scientific answers to this interesting question of "the tempo of evolution".[65]

One body of the evidence for evolution perhaps most disturbing to creationism is the great number and diversity of species existing and having existed on this planet, as well as the cantonment of different species in different geographical niches. A creationist would say this proves the richness of God's imagination, and his making special spaces for each of His creations. However, if God's ultimate purpose was specifically, as the Bible commentators claim, the creation of humans and the drama of their redemption, why go about it in such a roundabout way?

When the accepted scenario was as in the Bible narrative a seven-day process, mankind could seem like its crowning achievement. But now that science envisions a process of many billions of years, involving the birth, life and death, of innumerable individual organisms and species, only at the very end of which, some 6,000 years

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[65] See Curtis and Barnes, chapter 39.

ago, does historical man appear, one may well wonder what that was all about!

Why did some species – which may look ugly and stupid to us – exist for hundreds of millions of years and then vanish without descendants in some natural catastrophe? An omniscient Being would not need to make 'experiments' before getting to the point. Although faith is shaken by such reflections, the idea of evolution should certainly not be regarded as intrinsically anti-theistic. Perhaps we ought to view God not as a linear technician, but as a fine artist who wished to add richness and depth to His creation.

However described, evolution can also be imagined as a process run by God, so that what looks like mechanism or chance is really hidden intention. We can say either: (a) He programmed the whole thing since Creation; or: (b) He is behind the scenes at every stage, choosing each turning at every major fork of the way. Or again: He created genes capable of a great many possible combinations and mutations, either (a) letting them naturally change, as secular science proposes, or (b) using them as a potential array of tools for providential interference, as religion prefers. In any case, there is no problem, no difficulty in reconciling the two viewpoints.

As I have made clear throughout, I am personally persistently open to the idea of Divine intervention. But I prefer to leave it as a personal faith (I stress the words personal and faith) *applicable to any and all results* of

science, and not as a thesis *in competition with* scientific ones. This position makes it possible for me to retain my own faith in God, come what may in science. Whatever scientists at any time decide seems a true description of nature, I say: "OK—that was obviously God's will"; and if scientists change their mind later on the basis of new evidence or discourse, I just say "OK" again!

The very possibility of such flexibility shows that nothing science discovers or concludes about the world can ever affect faith in God. The notion of God is indeed (as Karl Popper suggested) unfalsifiable; this may make it irrelevant to most scientific inquiry, *but still does not falsify it*. This is one sense in which we can think of God as an absolute: our idea of Him is not relative to any particular view of the world, but compatible with all (though of course, *this is no proof* of God).

However, this principle of tolerance fails if one insists on a rigid literal (as against allegorical) interpretation of certain religious texts, and refuses to constantly readapt one's detailed beliefs to current empirical data and theorizing, continuing to promote received doctrines against all evidence and rational argument, so as to seem unshakably faithful.

The psychology of *religious fanaticism* is worth looking at. The fanatic seeks to appear firmly religious, thinking that such behavior demonstrates possession of the virtues of courage and loyalty. But in fact, beneath this veneer and bombast, excessive religiosity is on the contrary a mark of

cowardice and betrayal, which the clerical class (of whatever persuasion) has historically often shown itself adept at exploiting. The victims (and ultimately the clerics are victims too, of course) are taught intellectual abdication, i.e. to relinquish their experience and reason when it contradicts religious dogma, under the threat that if they have different opinions (however well based and argued) they will lose God's and the religious community's acceptance.

The same frame of mind is programmed in people within a totalitarian society (like Nazism or Communism): to avoid punishment and obtain rewards, on a more material plane, they will admit and do anything the powers-that-be suggest or demand. I do believe that 'fear of God' is a good attitude, a religious teaching that many people unfortunately lack; but I cannot conceive God as wishing people to deny and incapacitate their own minds and those of their neighbors. Truth cannot be served by lying or pretending. Spiritual growth relies on honest witness and rational criticism.

An open-minded religious attitude need not be construed as an outright denial of revelation, or of its historicity; but as an admission that such revelation, if it occurred, may well have been formulated *in the context of* knowledge of man and the world at the historical moment of its occurrence, because its purpose was not anticipation of material information but timeless spiritual guidance. Inversely, any gainsay by scientists of the possibility or

existence of God in the context of their findings and ideas is pretentious – it is using their (well-deserved) prestige beyond the limits of their field of study, making 'inferences' that are logically unjustified.

Religious people who resist science[66] do not bring credit to religion, but make it seem mentally retarded. It seems to me, granting God exists, that modern science has *aggrandized* rather than belittled the idea of God. Until recently, the scenario we imagined and believed of the creation of the universe, of the earth, of life and of mankind was very simple. The heavens were not very high, time was not very long, everything was relatively ready-formed and static, the earth was a small theater, and life on it a minor drama.

Now, the universe is perhaps 15 billion years old, containing billions of galaxies each with billions of stars, and black holes, all in motion, expanding. Inanimate matter has itself 'evolved' from quarks to electrons, protons and neutrons, to small atoms, to stars and larger atoms, to stars again and planets, to water molecules and

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[66] It should be stressed that such attitudes are not peculiar to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but equally found in Hinduism and Buddhism. The latter religions, too, *contain many beliefs that are out of step with modern science*. One example (drawn from various texts): the belief that the earth and humanity have always existed, with sentient beings (in human or other form) going round and round the wheel of karma forever, and so forth. These religions, too, did not predict the Big Bang or Evolution.

carbon, to life. On earth, there have been massive geological and climatic changes, living organisms appearing and diversifying, a bewildering variety of individual and species fates in a changing environment, punctuated by a few gigantic natural catastrophes causing mass extinctions.

All sorts of weird and wonderful creatures have inhabited this planet for hundreds of millions of years, long before we and most of our most visible neighbors appeared on it. It has been estimated that "less than 1/10 of 1 percent, perhaps less than 1/1,000 of 1 percent"[67] of species ever existing are currently in existence. Humans (in their present garb) are only very recent arrivals on the time line of life on earth. Other species, very similar to humans, lived and disappeared; some even coexisted with our ancestors for tens of thousands of years before dying out.

Surely, this new scenario is much more interesting and impressive. Imagine the unfolding drama of it all over the whole sweep of time. If anything, it glorifies God!

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[67] Curtis and Barnes, p. 552.

# 5. CHAPTER FIVE

Drawn from *Ruminations* (2005),

Chapter 2.19.

# PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

## 1. Two distinct endeavors

It is important to distinguish between religion (including philosophical discourse based on a particular religion, for apologetic or polemical purposes) and philosophy proper (which makes no direct appeal to premises from a religious tradition, though it may discuss religious issues).

This is a derivative of the distinction between faith and reason, keeping in mind that faith may be reasonable (i.e. without conclusive proof or disproof) or unreasonable (i.e. in spite of conclusive disproof). Note that reasonable faith is necessarily before the fact – for, if some fact is already

indubitably established, there is no need of faith in it. Unreasonable faith is contrary to fact.

Some philosophers regard faith in pure speculations, those that are in principle neither prov*able* nor disprov*able* (e.g. faith in the existence of God or in strict karma), as unreasonable. But I would class the latter as within reason, for it is always – however remotely – conceivable that some proof or disproof might eventually be found, i.e. the 'principle' is itself is hard to establish with finality. Moreover, the category of pure speculation is even applicable to some scientific theories (for example, Bohr's interpretation of quantum uncertainty as indeterminacy).

Religion is based on faith, i.e. on the acceptance of theses with insufficient inductive and deductive reasons, or without any reason, or even against reason (i.e. albeit serious divergence from scientific conclusions based on common experience and logic) – on the basis of statements by some assumed spiritual authority, or even merely because one feels so emotionally inclined.

Philosophy, on the other hand, is based on personal understanding, on purely empirical and logical considerations; although some or many of its theses might well to some extent be hypothetical, or even speculative, they remain circumscribed by scientific attitudes and theories – that is, a sincere effort is made to integrate them with the whole body of experience and reason.

The difference between religion and philosophy is not always clear-cut, note well. Religion is not throughout

contrary to reason, and philosophy is not always free of mere speculation. The difference is whether the credulity, or *degree of belief*, in speculative propositions is proportional or not to the extent of available adductive evidence and proof. In the case of mere faith, the reliance on a given proposition is disproportionate to its scientific weight; whereas in the case of rational conviction, there is an effort to keep in mind the scientific weight of what is hypothesized - one is ready to admit that "maybe" things are not as one thinks.

The two also differ in content or purpose. Religions are attempts to confront the problems of human finitude and suffering, through essentially *supernatural* explanations and solutions. The aim of religion is a grand one, that of individual and collective redemption. Philosophies resort to *natural* explanations and expedients, attempting to understand how human knowledge is obtained and to be validated, and thus (together with the special sciences) gradually identify ways and means for human improvement. There is still an underlying valuation involved in the philosophical pursuit, note well; but the aim is more modest.

To make such a distinction does not (and should not) indicate an antireligious bias. It is not intended as a 'secularist' ideology, but merely as a secular one. Religion (or at least those parts of particular religions that are not decisively anti-empirical or anti-rational) remains a legitimate and respectable human activity – it is just

recognized as being a different intellectual domain, something to be distinguished from philosophy so as to maintain a balanced perspective in one's knowledge.

## 2. Many people make claims

The reason this division was produced historically by philosophers was to protect philosophy (and more broadly, the special sciences) from being reduced to a supporting role, as the "handmaiden" of religion. It was necessary to make philosophy independent of religion to enable philosophers to engage in critical judgment, if need arose, without having to force themselves to be "religiously correct" or risk the ire of politically powerful religious authorities.

The secularization of philosophy was precisely this: a revolt against foregone conclusions imposed by religious authorities (i.e. people collectively self-proclaimed as sole torch-bearers of truth) as undeniable 'fact'. It is important to understand *the logical rationale* behind such a revolt, i.e. why it is epistemologically valid and necessary.

*Anyone can stand up and claim* to have been graced by some Divine revelation/salvation (or holy spirit) or to have attained some Buddhist or Hindu enlightenment/liberation.

Many people throughout history have made such metaphysical claims. Some have gone so far as to claim to be a god or even G-d. Some have not made explicit claims for themselves, but have had such claims made on their behalf by others. Some of the claimants – notably, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, and Buddha – have founded world-class religions, that have greatly affected the lives of millions of people and changed the course of history. Other claimants – like your local shaman, Egypt's Pharaoh, or Reverend Moon – have been less influential.

The common denominator of all these claims is some extraordinary mystical experience, such as a prophetic vision or a breakthrough to 'nirvana' or 'moksha' (enlightenment/liberation). The one making a claim (or claimed for by others) has a special experience not readily available to common mortals, on the basis of which he (or she) becomes a religious authority, whose allegations as to what is true or untrue are to be accepted on faith by people who have not personally had any commensurable experience.

The founding impetus is always some esoteric experience, on the basis of which exoteric philosophy and science are shunted aside somewhat, if not thoroughly overturned. The founding master's mantle of authority is thereafter transmitted on to disciples who do not necessarily claim an equal status for themselves, but who are pledged to loyally study and teach the founder's original discoveries.

Religion is essentially elitist, even in cases where its core experience (of revelation or enlightenment) is considered as in principle ultimately open to all, if only because of the extreme difficulty of reaching this experience.

In some cases, the disciples can hope to duplicate the master's achievement given sufficient effort and perseverance. In other cases, the master's disciples cannot hope to ever reach their teacher's level. But in either case, they are the guardians of the faith concerned, and thence (to varying degrees) acquire institutional 'authority' on this basis, over and above the remaining faithful.

Thus, we have essentially two categories of people, in this context.

a) Those who have had (or claim to) the religious experience concerned *first-hand*.

b) Those who, *second-hand*, rely on the claim of the preceding on the basis of faith, whether they have institutional status of authorities or not.

### 3. How to decide?

Now, this distinction is not intended to be a put-down, a devaluation of either category of person. But it is a necessary distinction, if we are to understand the difference in epistemological perspective in each case.

From the point of view of a first-hand recipient, i.e. someone who has personally had the mystical experience concerned, his discourse is (for his own consumption, at least) pure philosophy, not religion. He is presumably not required to have faith, but all the information and reasoning involved is presented to him on platter. His task is simple enough; his responsibility is nil, his certainty total.

But a second-hand recipient has a difficult task, epistemologically. He has to decide for himself whether the first-hand teacher is making a true or false claim. He has to decide whether to have faith in him or not. He is required to accept an *ad hominem* argument.

This objection is not a judgment as to the master's veracity. Some alleged masters are surely charlatans, who lie to others so as to rule and/or exploit them; some of these remain cynically conscious of their own dishonesty, while some kid themselves as well as others. But it may well be that some alleged masters are not only sincere, but

have indeed had the experience claimed and have correctly interpreted it.

*But who can tell?* Certainly not the ordinary Joe, who (by definition) has never had the experience concerned, and in most cases can never hope to duplicate it – and so is not qualified to judge. Yet, he is called upon to take it on faith – sometimes under the threat of eternal damnation or continuing samsara if he does not comply.

How is the common man to know for sure whether some person (contemporary – or more probably in a distant past, who may even be a mere legend) has or has not had a certain mystical experience? It is an impossible task, since such experience is intrinsically *private*!

To date, we have no scientific means to penetrate other people's consciousness. And even if we could, we would still need to evaluate the significance of the experience concerned. Such judgments could never be absolute and devoid of doubt, but necessarily inductive and open to debate. Thus, the 'certainty' required by faith could not be rationally constructed.

It is no use appealing to witnesses. Sometimes two or more people confirm each other's claim or some third party's. Moreover, often, alleged authorities disagree, and reject others' claims. But who will confirm for us innocent bystanders that any of these people are qualified to authenticate or disqualify anyone?

Thus, faith is a leap into the unknown. However, it is often a necessary leap, for philosophy and science are not able to answer all questions (notably, moral questions) convincingly, and we in some cases all need to make decisions urgently. So, religion has to be recognized by philosophy as a legitimate, albeit very private, choice. In this context, note well, secularism is also a religion – an act of faith that there is no truth in any (other) religious faith.

## 4. A word on Buddhism

Buddhism is today often painted as "a philosophy rather than a religion", implying that it does not rely on faith. But this is a patently unfair description: there are plenty of faith loci within Buddhism. Belief in the wheel of reincarnation (samsara), belief in the possibility of leaving it (nirvana), belief that at least one man attained this Buddha state (Siddhartha Gautama), belief in the specific means he proposed (moral and meditative disciplines, notably non-attachment), belief in a multitude of related stories and texts – all these are acts of faith.

These beliefs require just as much faith as belief in the existence of God, and other more specific beliefs (starting with belief in the Torah, or Christian New Testament, or Koran), within the monotheistic religions. The adherent to Buddhism must take on faith the validity of his spiritual

goal and pathway, *before* he becomes a Buddha (assuming he ever does). The end and means are not something philosophically evident, *till* he reaches the end through the means. This is the same situation as in the monotheistic religions.

So, Buddhism is not primarily a philosophy, but a religion – and to say otherwise is misleading advertising. The same is true of Hinduism, which shares many doctrines with Buddhism (as well as having some monotheistic tendencies, although these are not exclusive).

## 5. Evaluating claims

It is important to remain both: open-minded, granting some of the claims of religions as conceivable; and cool-headed, keeping in mind some of them are unproved. Intolerance of religion is not a proper philosophical stance, but a prejudice, a dogma. The true philosopher, however, remains sober, and does not allow himself to get carried away by emotional preferences.

Transcendental claims can, nevertheless, be judged and classed to some extent. Sorting them out is, we might say, the realm of theology (a branch of philosophy).

Some claims are, as already pointed out, directly contrary to experience and/or reason; if some harmonization cannot be construed, philosophy must exclude such claims. Some

are logically conceivable, but remotely so; these are to be kept on the back burner. And lastly, some are very possible in our present context of knowledge; these can be used as inspirations and motivations for secular research.

Generally speaking, it is easier to eliminate false claims than to definitely prove true claims.

Each specific claim should be considered and evaluated separately. It is not logical to reject a doctrine wholesale, having found fault with only some aspects of it (unless these be essentials, without which nothing else stands). In such research, it is well to keep in mind the difference between a *non sequitur* and a disproof: disproving premises does not necessarily mean their conclusions are false, for they might be deducible from other premises.

In choosing among religions, we usually refer to the moral recommendations *and behavior patterns* of their founder and disciples (as well as more sociologically, of course, to traditions handed down in our own family or society) as indices. If the advice given is practiced by those preaching, that is already a plus. If the advice and practice are wise, pure, virtuous, kindly, and loving, etc. – we instinctively have more confidence. Otherwise, if we spot hypocrisy or destructiveness, we are repelled. (Of course, all such evidence is inconclusive: it suggests, but does not prove.)

But, however persuaded we personally might be by a religious teaching, its discourse cannot be dogmatically taken as the starting premise of philosophy. *To a first-*

*hand mystic, it may well be; but to the rest of us, it cannot be.* Philosophy is another mode of human inquiry, with other goals and means. Spirituality and rationality are neither necessarily bound together, nor necessarily mutually exclusive. They might be mixed somewhat, but never totally confused.

Thus, if someone claims some mystical experience, or refers to authoritative texts based on some such foundation, his philosophizing might well be considered attentively and learned from to some degree, but it is ultimately irrelevant to pure philosophy; or more precisely such discourse can become in part or wholly relevant only provided or to the extent that it submits to the secular standards of public philosophy.

The latter can only refer to experiences and insights that can readily be duplicated, i.e. that are within everyone's reach (except a minority with damaged organs), if they but consider certain empirical data and follow a set of inductive and deductive arguments. It aims at developing, using ordinary language, a potentially universal worldview and understanding.

Admittedly, as some would argue, high-level philosophy (as with advanced mathematics or physics) is in practice not comprehensible to most laymen! Just as meditation or other religious techniques are not easily mastered, it takes a lot of effort and intelligence to learn and apply logic in depth. Moreover, the novice who enters the path of philosophy is as hopeful (full of faith in eventual results)

as the religious initiate; and all along both disciplines, small successes encourage him to keep going.

So, one might well ask the embarrassing question: what is the difference between the elitism of philosophy and that of religion? Ultimately, perhaps none, or just a difference of degree! This answer would be true at least of reasonable religion. But in the case of unreasonable religion, we ought not allow ourselves to believe in it – even as a remote possibility – until if ever it becomes manifestly reasonable, i.e. until and unless our basic view of reality is indeed overturned by actual personal experiences.

It is unwise to excessively compartmentalize one's mind and life; at the extreme, one may risk some sort of schizophrenia. One should rather always try to keep one's rationality and spirituality largely harmonious. Faith in religious ideas need not be an 'all or nothing' proposition; one can pick and choose under the guidance of reason. Reason is not in principle opposed to faith; it allows for its essentials.

## 6. Acknowledging science

The challenge for today's philosophers of religion, who wish to bring God and/or other religious ideas back into the modern mind, is to fully acknowledge and accept the current conclusions of modern science. It is no use trying to tell an educated contemporary that scientific claims –

regarding the age and size of the universe, the evolution of matter, the age and history of our planet, the evolution of vegetable and animal life on it, the emergence of the human species – are all wrong! Such discourse is irrelevant to the modern mind, if not absurd.

There is still room, side by side with the worldview of science, for religious ideas – but these must inductively adapt to survive. This is always possible by exploiting (within reason) loopholes in the current scientific narrative, whatever it happen to be at any given time. Instead of emphasizing conflicts, thinkers should seek out the conceptual possibilities for harmonization. Real scientists remain open-minded wherever there are lacunae.

Creationism need not be a fixed dogma. Rather than insist that the world was created in 6 days some 6'000 years ago, say that God is the creator of the initial matter-energy of the universe, and of the laws of nature and evolution inherent in it, and that He triggered the 'big bang' 13.7 billion years ago.

Moreover, in physics, suggest that the indeterminacy apparent in quantum mechanics is perhaps really the opportunity God uses to daily impinge on details of the world process. Or again, in biology, propose the first conversions of mineral into living and then animate matter (wherever and whenever they occurred) were maybe due to God's intervention; and rather than combat Darwinism, accept it as part of God's plan and hypothesize that the

apparently spontaneous occasional mutations of genes might well be miracles.

# 6. CHAPTER SIX

Drawn from *Meditations* (2006),

Chapters 5, 6, 8 and 33.

## MEDITATIONS

### 1. Interpretations of meditation

The underlying philosophy of meditation, in common to the main religious traditions, is often referred to as "**theosophy**"[68]. To formulate such a philosophy is of course not to claim it as necessarily true in all respects; we

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[68] Etymologically = God + wisdom. This may also be conceived atheistically (despite its name). It has also been called "the perennial philosophy" (by Aldous Huxley), because of its recurrence in history and across cultural barriers. Many writers throughout the ages have managed to formulate all or parts of this philosophy with considerable success, and I do not here presume to equal or surpass them. My purpose here is only to discuss some aspects of it, on the assumption the reader has already studied (or will eventually study) other texts.

must admit it to be a speculative philosophy or metaphysic. We can pursue the ends it sets in the way of a personal faith, without having to definitively 'prove' it and 'disprove' competing doctrines.

If we consider the seven historically most influential current mystical traditions – namely those of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Secularism[69] – without meaning to ignore or discard others (which are here assumed to have much in common with parts of one or the other of the main paradigms[70]), we can highlight some of the similarities and differences between them.

In almost all these traditions, meditation is understood as a "return" to some original high state of consciousness, or "reunion" with the underlying spiritual Source. Man is considered as having at some stage "fallen" from his natural, ideal spiritual condition, and become apparently "detached" from his place in the unity and totality of absolute reality – and thereafter, he struggles to recover it, and merge back into the whole[71].

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[69] Wherein I would include Confucianism, though it has some conceptual commonalties with Taoism; which one would expect, since they both come from the same culture, China.

[70] All of which, by the way, the author has studied to varying degrees – theoretically through various texts, and in some cases practically.

[71] Judaism speaks of *teshuvah* (return), *devekut* (adhering) and *yichud* (unification). The Sanskrit word 'yoga'

In the secularist approach, the corresponding argument would rather be developmental and/or evolutionary: i.e. though to all evidence we never before had higher consciousness, it might be something we (as individuals and as a species) can realistically strive for so as to reach our fullest neurological and biological potential. This developmental or evolutionary peak, however, need not be assumed to correspond to some mystical experience of absolute reality.

One major *issue of interpretation* is that of admission or rejection of Monotheism, the belief that the ultimate reality is a spiritual Person, i.e. God. Four of the seven traditions – namely Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism – opt for monotheism, although to varying degrees. Judaism[72] and Islam[73] insist on exclusive

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refers to union, as does the Greek word *henosis* used by Neo-Platonism.

[72] Judaism rejects any notion of incarnation of God. In the Jewish view, God is spiritual and not material. The Torah statement that God created humans in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:27) must be understood to refer to spiritual, not physical resemblance. God's infinity cannot be concentrated in a finite being (as many other religions suppose when they deify some historical or legendary figure), and He is not to be confused with the phenomenal universe of matter, space and time (as Spinoza confuses Him).

[73] Although it should be mentioned that there is a doctrine within Islam that grants Mohammed, the Messenger of *Allah* (God), the Divine status of "human incarnation of the Spirit" (to quote Lings, p. 33). In this context, Islam should be compared to Christianity and Hinduism rather than Judaism.

monotheism, whereas Christianity[74] opts for a three-in-one doctrine, and Hinduism[75] accepts a large pantheon of alternative or lesser forms of divinity (avatars and gods).

Buddhism, on the other hand (at least officially), denies that the ultimate reality is an eternal spiritual entity, or Soul (*Atman* in Sanskrit), with consciousness, volition, values and a personality (i.e. a Self) – in short, denies the existence of God[76] – and instead affirms the ultimate "emptiness" of everything[77].

However, upon closer scrutiny we find that Buddhist doctrine does (perhaps as it has evolved over time) suggest

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[74] The doctrine of the trinity was a logical outcome of the apotheosis of Jesus, the founder of Christianity. The Church wanted to grant Divine status to this man, yet at the same time emphasize his spirituality and reaffirm the Judaic doctrine of unity. Note that the Christian idea of trinity differs from the apparent radical duality of Zoroastrianism. Whereas Christian philosophy seems to adhere to the unity of God at the highest level, Zoroastrian philosophy seems to regard the two basic formative forces of good and evil it posits as irreducible primaries. Analogous concepts and issues are found in Hinduism, in greater multiples.

[75] It is in practice cheerfully polytheist, although at an academic level it acknowledges monotheism as the ultimate truth. Polytheism generally tends to a radical pluralism (of many irreducible primaries), although some forms of it may be considered relatively compatible with monism (or monotheism).

[76] Which was in Buddha's India advocated by Hinduism.

[77] Note that Jewish mystics (kabbalists) have proposed a similar concept, that of the *Ayn* (Hebrew for "There Isn't", i.e. Non-Being, different from and beyond ordinary being) or *Eyn Sof* ("There Isn't an End", i.e. Infinite, in extension or breadth [Great] and in intension or depth [Unfathomable]).

a substantial ultimate reality of sorts – something called "the original ground of mind (or of being)" or "Buddha nature", which for all intents and purposes could be equated in many ways to the monotheistic idea of God. Moreover, it is evident that the Buddha has de facto become deified in the popular mind, and we find the Buddhist masses identifying him with what we would call God.

Taoism is comparable to Buddhism, in that the Tao (or Way) seems like something impersonal, much like the "empty original ground". But there are occasional mentions of Heaven in Taoism that suggest a belief in God, or which leave the issue of God relatively open or ambiguous[78]. On the other hand, while Taoism does have Immortals (comparable to Buddhas), it does not seem to treat them quite as gods[79].

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[78] Anyway, Taoism is essentially a Monist philosophy, in that it conceives the Supreme Ultimate principle as a Unity. However, since Taoism describes this One as giving rise to Two (Yin and Yang), and then to Many, it may be compared to Dualism, and even, at times, to Pluralism (this is not said with any intention to downplay Taoism, but rather to point out its richness).

[79] To my limited knowledge (which is why I have placed this religion closer to Secularism). However, it should be noted (though the books we read about it in the West little mention the fact), Taoism as it has been popularly practiced in China involves many supernatural beliefs (many of which we would class as lowly superstitions) – ghosts, demons, exorcisms and the like.

Secularist philosophy, like Buddhism, rejects the notion of God. Atheists may nevertheless engage in meditation with rather materialist psychological and ethical motives, arguing that it is healthy for the individual to pursue centering and peace of mind, and good for society in general that people do so. They also point to practical benefits, like improved concentration at work, or better human relations. Thus, they meditate on the basis of a more narrow meliorism and eudemonism, i.e. as a means to self-development and happiness in a materialist worldview framework.[80]

The doctrinal diversity of the main traditions should not blind us to their essential unity. They mostly agree that the ultimate reality, the common source of all appearances, has to be unitary. *Diversity always logically calls for explanation: only a Unity seems to have a satisfactory finality.* This One is the Absolute – while the multiplicity of appearances, whether they seem real or illusory to us, are in comparison to it all relative. The true philosophy is thus necessarily Monist, which does not mean that we can deny the parallel existence at some level of plurality.

Among the features the traditions have in common, then, is the aetiological idea of the underlying unity of all

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[80] Note that some secularists nowadays subscribe to meditation with reference to ideas that were in fact diluted from general theosophy, or some fashionable Eastern religion like Buddhism, while unaware of or refusing to admit their spiritual motives and interest.

existents being an inexplicable, uncaused, first cause. In monotheism, this is the status of God, the Creator of the world. Similarly, Buddhists and Taoists speak of the "unborn" and "unconditioned" as the background and origin of all phenomena.[81] Concerning the debate between Theist monism and Atheist monism, more will be said further on.

We should also emphasize the soteriological commonalities between the different traditions. The world as a whole strives for its salvation, the return to its primeval unity. Redemption is both an individual and collective need and task. By improving oneself, one helps others improve and repairs the world as a whole; and one improves oneself by making an effort to help others and take care of the world.

In Buddhism (or at least its Mahayana version) it is considered that the highest realization (Buddhahood) is only possible to those who dedicate themselves to the redemption of all others sentient beings (this is called "the way of the bodhisattva"). Those who more selfishly work only for their own salvation (as Hinayana Buddhists are

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[81] Note that the idea of causelessness is also found in secularism. In modern physics, we have it in the Heisenberg Principle, which can be taken to suggest spontaneity of some natural processes; or again, in the Big Bang theory, with regard to the existence of the primal seed of matter and the initial explosion thereof. In psychology, some thinkers (though not all) admit the existence of freewill in humans.

accused of doing[82]) do not, so long as they do so, reach the highest spiritual peak.

In Judaism, and similarly in other monotheistic religions, since we humans, like sparks issuing from a flame, all share in the spiritual substance of God, we may – by working to redeem ourselves and helping other people find salvation[83] – be said (with all due proportionality and respect) to participate in God's redemption[84]. Reciprocally, He has a direct interest in our salvation and it is equally to His advantage to promote it. All have a common interest, and cannot find true rest in isolation.

This is in Hebrew called *tikkun atsmi vehaolam*, meaning the 'repair' of oneself and the world, implying a loss of wholeness that has to be recovered. It should be stressed,

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[82] I think this is an unfair accusation. The Theravada (called Hinayana by the Mahayana school) ideal is to concentrate on fixing oneself first; and then once has done so, one's sincere compassion for others will naturally be awakened (this is a possible interpretation of Gautama Buddha's trajectory). Whereas the Mahayana consider it is necessary to work on oneself and for others at the same time, because each side of this path helps the other succeed. Both approaches are probably equally valid, I would suppose – depending on the character or "karma" of the person involved.

[83] The *tsadikim* ("just men" in Hebrew), and in particular the *Moshiach* ("Anointed" one, or Messiah), are actively involved in saving souls. That is their spiritual profession, we might say. But ordinary people also of course participate in this work occasionally, if only as amateurs.

[84] This is implied, notably, in the philosophy of the kabbalist Isaac Luria.

however, that this doctrine is not an invitation to pretentious claims to human divinity. Though we hope to someday be reunified with God, the Divine Source of our soul or spirit – that does not mean we will ever *become* the whole of God. It only means we will lose our illusory individuality, and discover our real place in the universe as very tiny fractions of God's wholeness.[85]

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[85] It should be noted that orthodox Jewish doctrine might not include a final reintegration of all souls into God. I base this supposition on oral rather than written teachings. I recently questioned one Rabbi on the subject (namely Rav Mendel Pevzner of Geneva, a Lubavitcher chassid). He taught that we will never merge back into God – but will always remain separated as individual souls, having the function to eternally declare God's sovereignty and praise Him. Moreover, he confirmed, some evil individuals (at least the likes of Adolf Hitler) will never return to God. I did not inquire on what texts this doctrine is based, and even whether all Jewish authorities agree with it. I was a bit skeptical when I heard the part about the righteous souls remaining separated; but upon reflection, it does not seem logically inconceivable. Certainly, there are people who deserve eternal damnation and can never be purified of their sins whatever hell they go through. Granting that, then the possibility that just souls remain forever suspended in paradise sounds reasonable, too. It is worth emphasizing in this context that Judaism teaches love of life on earth more than any other of the main religions: Judaism cannot position itself radically against the world (totally rejecting the body and mind), since it considers that God created this world (including human beings) intentionally and that He views his Creation as "good" and even "very good" (Genesis, chapter 1). Notwithstanding all such issues, let us not forget that God remains One throughout: He always was One, He is still One now, He will always be One. Any separateness people may

## 2. The coexistence of the One and the many

There are apparent logical difficulties in the idea of Monism that need to be addressed, if we are to grant it credibility. One question people ask is: How can the world be essentially and absolutely (and only) One, and yet appear as a multiplicity of passing phenomena, entities and events? Can a whole be at once considered unitary and as having parts – is not such an idea self-contradictory? Are the One and the many compatible?

This question can be answered, without indulging in overly mystical discourse, if we realize it is already loaded with a certain epistemological point of view. There are in fact two possible viewpoints as to the cognitive and metaphysical relationship between the apparent many and their essential oneness. We can inductively claim either "unity in diversity" or "diversity in unity".

In the first thesis, which is most commonly known and advocated, and which is the premise of the above question, the One is a *conceptual derivative* of the many. According to this Pluralist theory, we directly experience a world of multiplicity, and then use our rational faculty to hypothesize an underlying Unity. The One is then a mere

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experience is an illusion of theirs, which their Maker does not share in.

concept – it is the most universal of all concepts, the fact of existence all phenomena share, the ultimate uniformity they share.

The problem with such a view of the One as derived from the many by conceptualization is that, as we have already mentioned, it has an inherent contradiction – the concept (of unity) we derive from the percepts (of manifold things) is in logical conflict with its source. Since things are primarily (phenomenologically) many, it is difficult to credibly affirm that they are ultimately (ontologically) One. The epistemological order of things affects the metaphysical perspective.

However, there is an alternative to this theory, which is less widely known and advocated, namely that the many are *ratiocinative derivatives* of the One. This Monist hypothesis, which is found already in Buddhist philosophy, and is today implied by modern physics, offers a less paradoxical dichotomy. In this reverse perspective, pure (pre-rational) experience is quite unitary; it is the cognizing Subject, who cuts this phenomenological primary given into a multiplicity of shapes, colors, motions, sounds, etc.

If we sit in meditation and just experience, we can soon realize that without interference on our part the multiplicity *is* a unity. It is only when we start analyzing it – making comparisons and contrasts, considering logical compatibilities and conflicts, and so forth –that the original unity is broken down into a seemingly endless

multiplicity. Granting the epistemological primacy of unitary experience, we can understand that ratiocination is the source of apparent multiplicity. In that case, the One and the many do not appear so much in logical conflict, and we can safely opt for a Monist metaphysical position.

Another question people often ask is by what process did the One generate the many? Was the One inherently *unstable*, that it had to break down into the many? Note that, whereas the preceding question related to the statics of the Whole-parts relationship, this one concerns the dynamics of it.

However, we can reply that this second question, like the first, involves presuppositions. One need not view the relationship of the One and the many as having a beginning or an end – it can be viewed as timeless; we can consider that the One has always been actually one and the same with the apparent many. Another viewpoint, more accurate in my view, and more in line with the Monist thesis just formulated, is to say that the One is always potentially apparently many, such potential being actualized as of when and so long as some Subject engages in ratiocinative analysis.

While the second question can be asked even from a non-theistic (or atheistic) perspective, it is most often asked in relation to Monotheism. People ask: Why did God create us, and the world at large? Was He discontented, in need of something, moved by some want, or did He act capriciously? If so, does such supposition not contradict

the idea of God as perfect and self-sufficient, as well as ultimately One, alone and indivisible?

Moreover, if He created us intentionally, why is it our mission in life to go back to pre-Creation? Does not the idea of 'repair' (*tikkun*, in Hebrew) imply an error to be corrected? Perhaps the error was not the Creation as such, but only the "original sin" in the Garden of Eden, i.e. a misuse by us of the faculties God gave us? Did God not foresee such misuse of volition (in which case He would have refrained from creation altogether)?

It is proper for a believer to ask such critical questions, for belief in God should always be based on rational reflection, so as to have a maximum of credibility and solidity.

Certainly, ideas suggesting that God might be subject to unfulfilled desires or that He might yield to some passing fancy are unacceptable, since they imply He has some incompleteness or fault, or that He is causatively determined or weak of will. However, the simple answer is that volition (in humans, and by extrapolation to an infinitely greater degree in God) is *free* – and to say that it is free is to mean that it can operate spontaneously, without mechanical connection to some reason, need, desire or whim[86].

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[86] See my work *Volition and Allied Causal Concepts* for a thorough analysis of freewill.

If an Agent (a human soul or God) must have a motive to ever at all exercise will, then there is ultimately no such thing as freedom of the will. It follows that to ask the question "why did God create?" is a misrepresentation of the nature of volition. To insist for some explanation or motive for a purely volitional act is to demand a deterministic framework where none applies. The question is therefore inappropriate.

Thus, the Judaic teaching that "God created us because He wanted to do good to someone other than Himself" is reasonable and consistent. It does not imply that God is lonely, or that He yields to a sudden impulse, or the like; for such explanations would assign an inappropriate causal model to God, implying some thoughts randomly arise within Him independently of His will, and then influence or determine Him. Granting God is the most fully volitional of beings, such functioning is inapplicable to Him; His will has to be solely and entirely His own choice and responsibility, a pure expression of Himself.

We can nevertheless rationalize God's creativity ex post facto as follows. We could say that so long as His unity remains undifferentiated, His great powers of consciousness (omniscience), volition (omnipotence) and valuation (justice and lovingkindness) remain unactualized potentials – i.e. their reality is concealed. In order to give these powers their full reality, God has to decide at some point *to exercise* these powers, i.e. to actualize their potential. To do so, He has to create a

diverse and changing world, creatures capable of good and bad, etc. – a world in relation to which He can not only be, but also act.

This seems to me a coherent theory. Note well that it does not affirm that God has actual consciousness, volition and valuation before he exercises these powers. There is a level or depth at which God is purely One – prior to any thought, will or intention of His whatsoever. Then at some stage, He Himself spontaneously decides to set a multiplicity in motion, starting with the creation within Himself of His own powers, and proceeding with their exercise by creating and running the world as we know it.

In this perspective, the scenario of a world having bad in it as well as good, although God was fundamentally well-meaning in creating it, is comprehensible. Good can only be exercised in a framework where bad is also possible. If good were the only polarity possible, i.e. if bad was impossible, there would be no choice of good and therefore nothing could be characterized as good (since good presupposes freewill, otherwise all you have is mechanics). Therefore, the possibility of bad had to be allowed. Obviously, God did not fear to make allowance for the bad: He trusted the good would triumph over it.

In this perspective, too, it is perfectly natural for God to both create a world *and* will it to return to its original oneness. It does not signify a "change of mind" on His part. On the contrary, it is indicative of His strength and confidence – that He can *ex nihilo* set a diverse world in

motion and expect this multiplicity to ultimately return to its unitary source. No error is involved – it is all quite intentional.

## 3. The individual self in Monism

Granting the Monist thesis briefly described in the preceding chapters, we can understand that our respective apparent individual selves, whether they are viewed as souls (entities with a spiritual substance distinct from mind and matter) or as something altogether non-substantial (as Buddhism suggests), have a relative mode of existence in comparison to the Soul of God (in Monotheistic religions), or to the underlying Original Ground of such being or the Tao (in competing doctrines).

If our selves are relative to some absolute Self (or a "Non-self", in Buddhism), they are *illusory*. In what sense, illusory? We might say that the illusion consists in artificially differentiating the particular out of the Universal – i.e. it consists in a para-cognitive somewhat arbitrary act of ***individuation***. Apparently, then, tiny fractions of the original Totality have given themselves the false impression of being cut off from their common Source. They (that is, we all) have lost touch with their true Identity, and become confused by their limited

viewpoint into believing themselves to have a *separate identity*.[87]

To illustrate the illusoriness of individuation, we can point to waves in a body of water. A wave is evidently one with the body of water, yet we artificially mentally outline it and conventionally distinguish it, then we give it a name "the wave" and treat it as something else than the water. *There is indeed a bump in the water; but in reality, the boundaries we assign it are arbitrary.* Similarly, goes the argument, with all things material, mental or spiritual.

The **Buddhist** thesis on this topic is generally claimed to differ somewhat, considering that all empirical appearances of selfhood are phenomenal, and nothing but phenomenal. And since phenomena are impermanent like wisps of smoke – arising (we know not whence – thus, from nowhere), abiding only temporarily, all the while changing in many ways, and finally disappearing (we know not wither – thus, to nowhere) – we may not assume any constancy behind or beneath them. Our particular self is thus empty of any substance; and similarly, there is no universal Soul.

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[87] Rather than suggest like Bishop Berkeley that we are ideas in the mind of God, the viewpoint here advocated is that we are, as it were, ideas in our own minds. God invented us, yes, and allowed for our seeming individuation; but He has no illusions about our separateness. It is we, in our limited and therefore warped perspective, who misperceive ourselves as individuals.

This thesis is of course sufficiently empirical with regard to the fact of impermanence of phenomena; but (in my view) there is a conceptual loophole in it. We can point out that it rejects any idea of underlying constancy without sufficient justification (i.e. by way of a *non-sequitur*); and we can advocate instead an underlying substance (material, mental or spiritual), with equally insufficient justification, or maybe more justification (namely, that this helps explain more things).[88]

Furthermore, we may, and I think logically must, admit that we are aware of our selves, not only through perception of outer and inner phenomena, but also through another direct kind of cognition, which we may call 'intuition', of *non-phenomenal* aspects. There is no reason to suppose offhand only phenomenal aspects exist and are directly cognizable. Indeed, we must admit intuition, to explain how we know what we have perceived, willed or valued *in particular cases*. Conceptual means *cannot* entirely explain such particulars; they can only yield generalities.

Thus, while understanding and respecting the Buddhist non-self doctrine, I personally prefer to believe in the spirituality of the individual self and in God. I may additionally propose the following arguments. To start with, these ideas (of soul and God) do not logically

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88 We shall further debate the issue of impermanence later on.

exclude, but *include* the notion of "emptiness"; i.e. it remains true that particular souls and the universal Soul *cannot* be reduced to phenomenal experiences.

Moreover, Monotheism is logically more convincing, because the Buddhist thesis takes for granted without further ado something that the God thesis makes an effort to explain. The manifest facts of consciousness, volition and valuation in us, i.e. in seemingly finite individuals, remain unexplained in Buddhism, whereas in the Monotheistic thesis the personal powers of individuals are thought to stem from the like powers of God. That is, since finite souls are (ultimately illusory) fractions of God, their powers of cognition, freewill, and valuing (though proportionately finite) derive from the same powers (on an infinitely grander scale) in the overall Soul, i.e. God.

In truth, Buddhists could retort that though this argument *reduces* the three human powers to the corresponding (greater) powers of God, it leaves unexplained the existence of these same powers in Him. They are derivatives in humans, all right, but still primaries in God.

Yes, but a distinction remains. Monotheism views the ultimate Source as having a personality, whereas for Buddhism, the Original Ground is impersonal. For the former, there is a "Who", while for the latter, only a "What" if anything at all. It seems improbable (to me, at least) that a person would derive from a non-person. Rather, the particular soul has to have this sense of

personal identity in the way of a reflection of the universal soul's personality.

But in truth, we can still intellectually reconcile the two doctrines, if we admit that such arguments are finally just verbal differentiations and that we should rather stress their convergences and complementarities.[89]

In any case, the apparent meditative success of Buddhists does not logically exclude the logical possibility that their doctrine denying soul and God may well be an error of interpretation – since other religions also report meditative successes although they resorted to other interpretations. If we generously accept all or most such human claims at their face value, we logically have to conclude that ***correct interpretation is not necessary for meditative success***.

This suggests that meditation is ultimately independent of doctrinal quarrels. Competing, even conflicting, doctrines may be equally helpful – depending on cultural or personal context. Therefore, meditation is ultimately a pragmatic issue; it does not need particular dogmas to yield its

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[89] Needless to say, I do not intend this statement as a blanket approval, condoning all beliefs and practices included in practice under the heading of Buddhism. I have in past works for instance voiced my reserves regarding the worship directed at statues (idolatry). Even from a Buddhist point of view, this is a weird and spiritually obstructive practice (since it involves mental projection of "selfhood" into purely physical bodies). Moreover, I do not see how this can be an improvement on the worship of God. If devotion is a good thing, surely the latter is its best expression.

results. Whatever your religious preference, or lack of it, just add one ingredient – meditation; this single measure will over time naturally perform wonders anyway.

The modern **Secularist** denial of spiritual substance (a soul in humans and God) can be depicted as follows. We are in this case dealing with a materialist philosophy, which grants solid reality only to the phenomenal (and conceptual inferences from it). The material phenomenon is regarded as exclusive of any other, although if pressed secularists will acknowledge some sort of additional, mental substance, imagined as a sort of cloud of "consciousness" hovering in the heads of certain material entities (i.e. at least humans and possibly higher animals).

This substance is conceived as a sort of epiphenomenon of specific combinations of matter (namely, those making up a live human body, and in particular its neurological system). They effectively consider mind as a rarified sort of matter. The proponents of this thesis make no clear distinction between the stuff of memories, dreams and imaginings, on the one hand, and the one experiencing these inner phenomena and indeed (via the senses) outer phenomena, on the other. And therefore, they reject all notion of an additional spiritual substance or soul as the essence of self.

This philosophy can thus be doubted on two grounds. Firstly, it fails to clearly and honestly analyze mental experience and draw the necessary conclusions from such analysis. Notably missing is the distinction between the

intuited "cognizing, willing and valuing self" and his (or her) "perceived mental (and sensory) experiences", i.e. the distinction between soul and mind within the psyche. Secondly, while secularism does tend to monism in respect of matter, it refuses a similar monist extrapolation with respect to souls, and so denies God.

Today's Secularists of course pose as "scientists"[90], and by this means give their doctrine prestige among non-philosophers and superficial philosophers. But this stance is not scientific, in the strict sense of the term. *Physical science has to date not produced a single mathematical formula showing the reducibility of life, mind, consciousness, or spirit/soul to matter.* Materialists just *presume* that such a universal reductive formula will "someday" be shown possible. Maybe so; but until that day, they cannot logically rely on their presumption as if it were established fact.

They *think* their materialism is "sure" to be eventually proved all-inclusive – but this expectation and hope of theirs has for the moment, to repeat, no scientific justification whatsoever! It is just a figment of their

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[90] Some are indeed scientists – in their specific field, such as Physics. But this does not entitle them to a free ride in the general field of Philosophy. I am thinking here of Hubert Reeves, who appears on TV claiming atheism as incontrovertible fact, as if any other view is simply unthinkable. Laypersons should not confuse his prestige and media-presence with logical confirmation of his view. The underlying fallacy is *ad hominem* argument.

imagination, an act of faith, a mere hypothetical postulate. Secularism is thus *just another religion*, not an exclusive inference from Science.

*"Science" is entirely defined by rigor in cognitive method, without prejudice. It demands all available data be taken into consideration by our theories, and duly explained by these theories*. Genuine philosophers are not intimidated by the intellectual thuggery of those who pretend that science is exclusively materialist.

In the case of the Materialist theory, the evident data of life, mind, consciousness and spirit or soul has hardly even been acknowledged by its advocates, let alone taken into consideration. It has simply been ignored, swept under the carpet, by them. That is not science – it is sophistry. What is speculative must be admitted to be such. And two speculations that equally fit available data are on the same footing as regards the judgment of science.

## 4. Already there

A phenomenological stance is consistent with the teachings of meditation by Zen masters, when they insist that meditation is not a pursuit aimed at acquiring Buddhahood (ultimate realization). We are already Buddhas, they teach, and *zazen* is merely the typical behavior of Buddhas.

By sitting in meditation, we simply express the "Buddha-nature" already in us, rather than try to add it on to us. We express our native Buddhahood, our very "ground of being" as conscious entities. We just settle comfortably into the "nature of mind", i.e. into pure consciousness.

Placing and resting one's consciousness at the phenomenological level, the domain of appearances, we naturally, without artificial activities, recover our true identity and a true perspective on all things. By floating freely on and in the waters of the ocean, we become one with the ocean and know it more intimately than any motorized mariner ever could.

Similarly, in Judaism and like religions[91]. Faith in the existence and omnipresence of God – an effective faith in everyday life, including trust in His guidance and

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[91] Christian ideology (of Pauline origin, if I am not mistaken) is that faith suffices for salvation. But the purpose of this idea is to attract converts, by making that religion seem easy; it is an advertising ploy, to obtain a first commitment. I doubt if any Christian would seriously consider a mere declaration of faith sufficient. Faith still has to be proved in practice through certain good works; faith has to be lived out, through certain required behavior patterns (like loving your neighbor, for example). Some works are indeed discarded by the Christian faith-only doctrine; these are certain Judaic commandments, like the prohibition of pork or the need to wear prayer phylacteries. (A similar approach is found in Pure Land Buddhism, by the way: on the surface, faith is initially presented as enough; but thereafter, there is a teaching about good works. This includes, not only chanting a certain name, but various moral injunctions.)

providence and submission to His rule – is considered *equivalent, for most intents and purposes*, to full consciousness of God.

In other words, it is not necessary to be at a supreme level of consciousness of God's presence in order to be agreeable to God. If one believes in Him and serve Him as one should; whatever one's spiritual level, if one lives, thinks and acts in a manner that constantly acknowledges His unseen presence and kingship, one has equally well fulfilled one's duty.

If one acts *as if one has* God-consciousness, then *one effectively has* God-consciousness. Just as a servant does not require an audience with the lord of the manor to fulfill his task, one does not need to receive fancy personal revelations to conscientiously and loyally do one's job in this world. Our works, whatever they are, loudly proclaim our actual spiritual position.

By "works", here, I mean: mental and physical behavior, including personal, social and religious acts. I am using the expression in a broad manner, tolerant of various traditions. I am referring to moral virtues most people agree with, like personal rectitude, common decency, helping others, fairness in law, kindness to animals, and so forth[92]. Without moral behavior, one cannot seriously

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[92] From the Judaic viewpoint, this would refer to the "laws for the children of Noah" (i.e. for humanity at large). This is considered ordinary "savoir vivre" (*derech eretz*, in Hebrew). It

claim to believe in God. Therefore, such good behavior may be considered (partial) evidence of belief.

Religious acts, like prayer or various ritual acts, are also (partial) evidence. If one prays to God, one may logically be assumed to believe in Him (at least that much); one would not bother praying otherwise (except of course pretending to pray for the social benefits it might bring; e.g. to belong in a community). Similarly for other acts of worship: engaging in Divine service may (normally) be taken to imply belief in the Divine.

Of course, orthodox Judaism takes all this much further, and insists all the 613 commandments (the *mitzvoth*), as understood by the Rabbis, must be obeyed. Strictly speaking, any deviation from this principle would be a failure of belief in God. That may well be true – I do not here argue for or against it[93]. All I wish to do here is point out that we are to some extent conscious of God well before we reach our spiritual ideal.

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does not only include external actions, but the underlying thoughts (for example, if you hate your neighbor in your heart, overt displays of benevolence are hypocrisy).

[93] Although, as I have pointed out in *Judaic Logic*, belief in God does not necessarily imply belief in an alleged revelation from Him. The latter is an additional step, found in each of the Monotheistic religions in relation to a different “revelation”. Similarly, within Judaism historically, there have been believers in the written law (Torah) who had doubts relative to the so-called oral law (Talmud). I say all this quite objectively, without intending to advocate one position or another.

This defines the Monotheistic equivalent of the Zen concept of being "already there". Another way to express the same thing is to remind us that we were created in God's image and likeness – i.e. that our deepest nature is God-like. This may be equivalent to the "original face" spoken of in Zen.

If one keeps this theoretical self-knowledge in mind, and constantly reminds oneself that one's soul is a bit of God's own holy spirit, one can hardly go wrong in practice. One will naturally engage in "imitation of God", doing one's best to honor this treasure within us and others, and not dishonor it in any way.

As of the moment I interiorize the Zen notion that I am one with the universe, or the Jewish notion that I am a piece of God, I am as good as "already there" (that is, here and now). I have already effectively awakened to the effervescence of existence, to the miracle of all that occurs. The distinction between this practice and some ultimate attainment as a result of it becomes, as the saying goes, "purely academic".

Nevertheless, paradoxically, all this is not intended as an argument to stop meditating! Why? Because if one does not meditate, one cannot *know* firsthand and experientially that one is "already there" – one can only at best "think so" by hearsay and conceptually, and that is simply not enough. One must keep meditating to advance, and it is only ongoing meditation practice that makes one's current spiritual level equivalent to the ideal level.

Thus, keep meditating! For without some spiritual practice, you sink back into gloomy darkness; while with practice, in one way or another, you are already (as above explained) effectively enlightened. It is that easy.

# 7. CHAPTER SEVEN

Drawn from *Zen Judaism* (2008),

Chapter 1.

## THE IDEAS OF GOD AND CREATION

### 1. The idea of God

The existence of God is suggested by the existence of the individual soul each of us intuits within his or her cognitions and volitions, as well as by various intellectual arguments[94]. The idea of God is philosophically reasonable, as *an extrapolation from and explanation of* the intuited fact of soul – for just as the scattered instances of mind and matter logically require some monistic unification, so do the scattered instances of soul; and

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[94] Described and discussed over the years in previous works of mine.

indeed, these several unifications need in turn to eventually be unified together.

The important insight to have, here, is that the *personal* soul, with powers of consciousness, will and valuation, cannot be explained by reference to an *impersonal* spiritual Ground of Being, devoid of similar and greater powers of consciousness, will and valuation, which is the Buddhist atheistic thesis, and even less to an exclusively materialist postulate.

The idea of a living, personal God, with presumably extreme degrees of these same powers (i.e. omniscience, omnipotence and moral perfection), would seem a logical inference from our own finite existences. It is more than a mere extrapolation – it is an explanation, without which the introspectively evident fact of a personal soul remains surprising and unexplained.[95]

The idea of God seems perfectly reasonable and inevitable to whoever clearly reflects on the miracles of existence, of variety and change, of consciousness, and of causation and volition, in this world. Without such fascination, i.e. if one dimwittedly takes all that for granted and is not surprised by all of it, one is intellectually bound to some sort of atheism. Theism (i.e. monotheism, belief in God) is a product of metaphysical amazement.

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[95] Note the similarity and difference between this argument for God, and the one Descartes proposed.

If one asks enough questions and looks for credible answers, one is likely to believe in God. Disbelief depends on keeping one's mind somewhat closed to the issue, i.e. on a sort of enforced dumbness.

## 2. The idea of creation

Justifying the idea of God does not by itself justify the idea of Creation as such, and much less a particular view (like that of Genesis) of the sequence of events involved in creation. Philosophically, Creation is a separate issue, requiring we advance additional evidence and arguments. In this context, we would first of all argue that, just as we humans have cognitive and volitional power over matter, so by analogy or extrapolation does the presumed greater soul that is God have such powers and that to a much higher degree.

This is an argument in favor of the concept of Divine creation, i.e. of the conceivability of God having such power over matter. But it is not of course alone logically sufficient to establish the fact of Divine creation. On the other hand, the insufficiency of this argument to prove creation does not disprove it, either.

Moreover, the analogy is imperfect, because whereas we can only rearrange existing matter in various ways, we presume God to have created matter *ex nihilo* (or at least from non-matter). However, the said imperfection in

analogy may be explained away by suggesting that individual souls are too small and weak to produce matter, though they are capable of mental creations (imagination), whereas the universal soul of God is grand and powerful enough to produce matter as well as mind. In causal logic terms: a complete cause may cause effects that a partial cause cannot.

We could also argue that in every little act of human (or animal) volition, some degree of creation is involved. That is, the act of willing may be conceived as the human spirit moving matter by injecting new energy into it. Such energy input may be regarded as equivalent to creation, since ultimately energy and matter are one. In this perspective, the great creation of the material world by God may be conceived by analogy from the little creative acts involved in our everyday will.[96]

A further argument we might propose to buttress the idea of creation would be Monism. This philosophy is based on the logical need for an ultimate unity between the substances or domains constituting the world of our experience, namely matter, mind and soul. Granting such basic unity, the ontological distance between God (as the common ground of all souls) and perceived matter and mind is considerably reduced, making creation more acceptable to reason.

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[96] For a detailed analysis of the nature and mechanics of will, see my work *Volition and Allied Causal Concepts*.

We can furthermore adduce the observed fact of impermanence of material and mental phenomena in support of the hypothesis of creation. How so? Impermanence does not of course logically imply creation, but it suggests it somewhat if we admit that underlying phenomenal impermanence is the permanence of the spiritual realm. This refers to the permanence of the spiritual substance our individual souls are made of, i.e. it refers to God, the great root Soul, rather than to us humans as individuated spirits.

If impermanent things emerge from the Permanent, the latter might be said to be the ground or cause of the former. This causal relation may be postulated as one of creation, if we consider that the eternal universal Soul has (like us and more so) *a personality*, with powers of cognition, volition and valuation, as earlier argued.

### 3. Two acts of faith

Howbeit, both the successive ideas of God and Creation still depend on faith. The preceding arguments in their favor, and any other similar reasons we might propose, only constitute inductive building blocks; they are not enough to be declared incontrovertible proof. Such absolute proof seems inconceivable for limited intellects like ours – only God could conceivably know for sure that He exists and He created the rest of the world.

This can and should be freely admitted by all advocates of these monotheistic ideas, to preempt any impression their opponents might give that lack of full proof is disproof. For advocates of atheism often use this fallacy to trick the gullible, suggesting that since monotheism cannot be definitively proved, the opposite thesis must be true. Such argument ignores or discards the fact that atheism is equally impossible to definitively prove!

As for the in-between posture of agnosticism, it is not unrespectable, since both monotheism and atheism are based on some measure of faith. But suspension of judgment is not the only posture reason can recommend, for then almost everything we claim as knowledge would be relegated to a similar intellectual limbo. Human beings are required by their natural condition to make choices and take action; if they truly avoided doing so, they would simply die out. Thus, agnosticism does not actually occur in practice – people who theoretically go for it must still daily go one way or the other (in the way of believers or that of atheists), whether they admit they do or not.

# 8. CHAPTER EIGHT

Drawn from *Volition and Allied Causal Concepts* (2004), Chapter 16:3[97].

## SUNDRY REFLECTIONS ON THE SOUL AND GOD

### 1. About the soul

The soul is what we regard as the essence of a person, the unitary substance that is both subject of consciousness and agent of volition. This soul need only be present during the life of the physical organism sustaining it, not before or after.

Ontologically, whether the soul is perishable or imperishable does not seem relevant to our study of its cognitive, volitional and evaluative capacities.

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[97] This chapter should have been included in the first edition after chapter 4, but was for some reason left out.

Epistemologically, how would we know it as a fact either way? If there is no contradiction in either concept, and no evident immediate knowledge of it, we must revert to generalizations and hypotheses to establish it. From a philosophical point of view, the soul may be either short-lived or undying; equally. Some souls may be short-lived to different degrees (animals, humans), some undying (God's at least). There is no law of causality, nor law of knowledge, requiring all subjects or agents to be imperishable or to age equally.

Mortality does seem more empirically justified – in that people and animals evidently are observed to physically die. If the soul is an epiphenomenon of matter, it is probably mortal. Immortality implies literally an eternity of existence, and not merely life after death for some time; this seems a very unlikely hypothesis, unless we refer to the religious thesis that the soul originates in God and eventually merges back into Him, or similar ideas. The issue remains forever (i.e. so long as we exist) open, speculative.[98]

I am not sure Judaism (at its Biblical core, at least) and allied religions ultimately believe in immortality, though they may believe in some transmigration, or at least in the ultimate resurrection of the dead. The 'messianic age' is projected as a period of happy existence for differentiated

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[98] Note that my position concerning knowledge of the existence of God is that we can neither prove nor disprove it; on this topic, see my *Judaic Logic*, chapter 14. My views concerning how we ordinarily arrive at knowledge of the nature of God are expounded in *Phenomenology*, chapter 9. Note that I make no claim that anyone has attained to prophetic knowledge, though I keep an open mind relative to this notion.

individuals, rather than as a nirvana wherein all will fuse with God. Just as at some past time, God was alone, so at some future time, He will again be alone: only He (or His Soul, pronoun and noun having one and the same referent) is Eternal. But on the other hand, logically, just as we came from God before we got to Eden, perhaps after the messianic age we shall indeed eventually return to Him.

> The philosophical position concerning the soul adopted in this volume is that it is either directly intuited by itself, or at least implied by its functions of cognition, volition and valuation, some of which are certainly directly intuited (i.e. experienced, although not as concrete phenomena). We could refer this position to the Cartesian "*cogito, ergo sum*" (I think, therefore I am), if we understand the term 'thought' broadly enough, as referring to the three functions. Epistemologically, I infer that I am, due to having experiences, using logic and forming concepts (cognition), intending or doing actions (volition) and expressing preferences (valuation). Ontology reverses this order, acknowledging the self as logically prior to any and all such 'thoughts', as their implied subject or agent.

The notion of a soul no doubt has a history. I do not claim to know it, can only roughly guess at it. The idea of a personal soul is thought by historians to be rather recent – dating apparently from the time humans started burying their dead, or otherwise ritually disposing of them. Much

later, philosophers (notably Aristotle[99]) developed the hierarchical distinction between vegetative soul, animal soul and human soul. The first level of soul (involving birth, nutrition, reproduction, growth, decay, death) was found in plants, beasts and humans; the second level (involving locomotion and sensation), only in the latter two; and the third level (involving reason, and exceptional liberty), only in the last.

Buddhism (or at least some currents of it), distinctively, denied the real existence of a soul, considering the 'self' apparently at the center of the individual's consciousness as an illusion[100]. According to the mentalist school

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[99] This distinction was later adopted by Jewish mystics, using the terms *ruach, nefesh and neshamah* (although they seem to interpret them in very divergent ways, however convenient – probably because the terms are not clearly defined, and seemingly interchangeable, in the Bible, from which they are drawn). Similar ideas are found in other cultures, but here again I can only guess the history.

[100] Although, if we examine some of the arguments put forward in support of the no-self claim, their illogic is glaring! This is particularly true of the pseudo-reasoning of the foremost philosopher of the Madhyamika school, the Indian Nagarjuna (2nd Cent. CE). To give an example I recently came across in a book by the Dalai Lama (pp. 54-5): "The Vaibhashikas therefore understand final nirvana in terms of the total cessation of the individual. A well-known objection by Nagarjuna… [if so] no one ever attains nirvana, because when nirvana is attained the individual ceases to exist." Nagarjuna is a joker, who likes to play with words (see my *Buddhist Illogic* for many more examples). He here suggests that 'attainment' is only conceivable through alteration (where the subject remains essentially the same, while changing superficially). But it is logically quite conceivable that the individual disappears upon crossing over into nirvana: that would simply be a case of

(Yogacara), the apparent self is based on eight modes of consciousness – the five due to sensory perceptions; the mental faculty correlating and interpreting them (like the 'common sense' of Aristotle); and two more. The seventh mode (called *manas*) refers to the deluded impression of having a separate self, giving rise to conceit, selfishness, and similar afflictions. The eighth mode (called *citta* or *alayavijnana*) is considered the repository of 'karma', making possible the delays in consequences of actions.

Thus, the 'seventh consciousness' may roughly be equated to the ordinary concept of present soul, although it is declared illusory[101]; and the 'eighth consciousness' may be ultimately compared to the religious concept of a soul that passes on from body to body, although a carryover of potentiality is implied rather than perpetuation of actual existence. This series might be completed by the notion of the 'original ground' or 'causal ground' of consciousness and existence, the Nirvana of one-mind and no-mind – which could be considered as related to our concept of God. Although Buddhists would likely deny it, the analogy seems to be apposite, because it shows the recurrence and uniformity of certain concepts in all human cultures.

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mutation (where the one-time subject becomes something else entirely at a later time). There is nothing absurd in the said Vaibhashika position. (Note incidentally that that position is analogous to the theistic idea of merging back into God, mentioned higher up.)

[101] The accusation of illusion is due to their considering the notion of self as a product of conception *from mental and sensory perceptions* (i.e. *dharmas*, phenomena), rather than as I propose as something known by direct self-intuition (i.e. experience with a *non*-phenomenal content).

## 2. About God

Another Indian culture, Hinduism, as well as other peoples and philosophies, consider God more frankly as the Soul of the universe, the common root of all particular souls. In Judaism and sister religions, God is projected as a conscious Presence overseeing (in a cognitive and volitional sense, and in the evaluative sense of lawgiver) the whole world, much as each of us has a soul reigning over his or her own little world. Some suggest, as already mentioned, that our own soul is but a spark[102] out of God's.

Some consider God as transcendent, others as immanent. The latter end up equating God with Nature, in the way of pantheism (Baruch Spinoza comes to mind, here). The human belief in God may have historically developed out of animism, itself probably a generalization of the vague notion of a personal soul.

Peoples living close to Nature (the Indians of North America, for instance) tended to perceive an *undifferentiated* godliness in all life and indeed in all of nature. Everything had a soul—a bubbling stream or a roaring ocean, a majestically immovable mountain, a pebble rolling downhill, the Sun, the Moon, the vast sky, one day blue, one day grey and rainy, rolling clouds and thunder in the sky, the wind brushing though the forest, a bud flowering, a soaring eagle, a roaming cougar, field

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[102] The idea of a 'spark' is drawn from Lurianic kabbalistic philosophy.

mice scattering, a fish jumping up. God was everywhere to be seen and encountered.

Such ideas may have in time become concretized, with the notion of *discrete* "spirits" residing in a stone or tree or river or mountain. Each thing was thought to have consciousness and volition, just as people intuited these powers within themselves (probably long before they named them). People might then seek to talk with bodies of inanimate matter as with animals; for instance, to respectfully ask permission to interact with them in some way. Or they might have to trick or fight them into doing what they wished them to. Eventually, these small, scattered "gods" were taken home or at least represented in stone or wooden idols (as apparently in Africa).

Some gods, like perhaps those of Nordic peoples, may of course have evolved out of historical persons – kings or heroes who were remembered in stories and eventually became larger-than-life myths. Later, as in Greece and Rome, more abstract gods evolved, who represented broad domains of the world (like the heavens or the sea) or of human activity (like love or war).

Eventually, apparently thanks to the Hebrews, *monotheism* was born, i.e. belief in a single and sole universal spiritual God. Founded by the patriarch Abraham, Judaism became a more organized national religion a few centuries later[103]. Eventually, through

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[103] A more concrete 'monotheistic' religion, consisting of worship of the Sun exclusively, appeared briefly in Egypt at about that time. But the question is, who inspired whom? It is certainly equally conceivable that a small foreign contingent

Christianity and Islam, both much later offshoots of Judaism, abstract monotheism gained ascendancy in large parts of the world. Christianity is closer to Judaism than Islam in some respects, further in others. The former is more explicitly rooted in Judaic textual details, whereas the latter uses them more as a tacit springboard. Christianity retains some concrete ideas and images relative to its founder Jesus, while Islam like Judaism eschews all such deification or representation.

Still today, in India for instance, the pantheon of gods and the ubiquity of images of them is striking. Although Hinduism has also long ago reached the idea of abstract monotheism, it has not made it exclusive. Buddhism, for its part, attained a high level of abstraction, but without personalizing it as God (at least not originally, although many Buddhist offshoots have in practice identified the founder Buddha with God). This is consistent with the Buddhist doctrine that even the human soul is ultimately "empty" of personality. However, Buddhists have remained influenced by ancient idolatry, in view of the statues of Buddha they worship (and thus mentally project 'soul' into, note)[104].

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(Hebrew slaves) culturally influenced the larger host (some of the Egyptians).

[104] To be fair, it may be that in the minds of some practitioners of meditation, statues and flat images are not objects of worship, but mere aids to achieving the depicted stillness, silence and concentration. One would have to ask individual practitioners what their real intentions are. All the same, it would seem likely that someone starting with imitation in mind, will develop an emotional attachment to the representative object and end up personifying it and bowing down to it. Which, to my mind, is silly, to say the least.

Jewish monotheism is not about God being the Soul of Nature. Nature (*hateva*) is sometimes said to be one of the 'names' of God – but this is taken to mean (e.g. by Maimonides) that Nature is in God's power. In Judaism, God is *absolutely abstract and without any concrete manifestation whatsoever* – no incarnation in human or any other form, and nothing that can be represented by an image. Or more precisely, God is purely spiritual and never material. He is nevertheless the Creator of the world of nature, and remains all-knowing and all-powerful in it. Omniscient – not merely in the sense of knowing generalities (as Aristotle suggested), but also in the sense of knowing every particular; and thus able to exercise providence down to the last detail – as befits omnipotence.

This is analogous to the human soul, which has no phenomenal aspects[105] of its own, although it is capable of knowing and interacting with the phenomenal world. However, the analogy is not total, since Judaism teaches that the world is not God's body, and moreover that humans did not create their own bodies but God created both their bodies and their souls (Genesis 2:7):

> *"And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."*

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[105] In this respect, Judaism has similarities to Buddhism; although unlike the latter, the former recognizes a non-phenomenal 'spiritual' substance for soul. Another possible analogy is that between the "Ayin" (non-existence, nothingness) of Jewish kabbalah and the "Shunyata" (emptiness) of Buddhism.

So, it is conceivable to Jews that whereas God is eternal, humans are not; and it is also conceivable that God's 'breathing life' into us was animating our bodies with a bit of His eternal Soul.

As these reflections show, the histories of the notion of soul and of that of God are closely intertwined. One of the functions of religion and/or metaphysics is to propose origins for soul and God, and explain how they are known.

Catholic Christians, to varying degrees, use *material* representations of Jesus in their homes, churches and processions. This may historically be an inheritance from the representation and worship of Roman emperors, which was widespread and seemed normal in the world Christianity took over. Protestants, later on and for various (political as well as spiritual) reasons, have for the most part eschewed three-dimensional sculptures and dolls, but they still resort to *mental* representations as well as to two-dimensional pictures. Hinduism and some forms of Buddhism similarly resort to incarnations of numerous divinities, giving them bodily form or thinking of them concretely.

These are *perceptual* ideas about divinity. Judaism, and later on Islam, on the basis of the narratives in their scriptures (the Torah and the Koran, respectively) ascribe perceptible *behavior* to God, in the way of manifest miracles (if only the sending of an angel or a prophetic vision, or the decree of a legal system), but they exclude any physical or mental representation of God, which they reprove as "idolatrous". The idea(s) of God transmitted by their holy books, and later reinforced by interpretative commentaries, are essentially *conceptual*.

As philosophers we might ask: what is the rationale for the worship of statues or other representations? Does the worshipper consider that material (or mental) object itself to be what he or she is worshipping (fetishism), or to contain the divinity aimed at or be an emanation of it or a channel to it – or does the concrete object at hand merely serve as a mnemonic or as an expedient means to focus personal attention on a divinity far beyond it?

One would have to enter people's minds to find out for sure (for their own introspections and oral reports are not necessarily reliable). I would suspect that there is a wide range of attitudes in different people, some imagining a more literal interpretation, others being more conscious of the possible distinctions. The spiritual issue is: does this practice 'weigh down' the soul, preventing it from 'rising' to the formless?[106]

> I should add that I personally suspect that people who believe in some incarnation(s) of God, or in narrow gods or idols, and even atheists or agnostics, *often or at least occasionally* lift their eyes and prayers to the heavens, effectively intending to appeal to or thank God. That is to say, adherence in principle to some non- or not-quite

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[106] The essential purpose of idolatry, I would say, is to *imprint* people's minds with alleged representations of gods or God. It is a powerful form of advertising, which produces psychic dependence on the idol, so that it is voluntarily or involuntarily recalled and appealed to in various circumstances. This incidentally benefits the clerical class tending and serving the idol; although, to be fair, the members of that class are rarely hypocritical, but themselves true (indeed, usually truer) believers.

monotheistic doctrine does not exclude the occasional intuition and practice of monotheism. The issue here is not the culturally specific name given to the Deity, or the theoretical constructions usually associated with that name, but the actual intention of the praying soul at the moment concerned. I think all or most humans have that understanding and reaction in common.

### 3. Theology

Philosophical theism or theology offers no narrative, no stories, concerning God; it is therefore, of course, free of any concrete representations. It consists of frank, changing *speculations* of a general sort, as to whether *in the context of ordinary human cognitive faculties* an abstract God can be definitely known to exist – or for that matter, not to exist.

Extraordinary forms of knowledge (allegedly attained, for instances, through prophecy or meditation) are not inconceivable, but hard to prove to us ordinary people; they therefore remain speculations. Honest philosophers have no prejudice on the subject, and freely admit room for doubt. Nevertheless, they find it possible to formulate consistent theories, which *might* be true about God and soul. On this basis, though no dogma is allowed, various *personal faiths* are possible.

In this way, without imposing any particular religious doctrine, philosophy may yet save the fact of religion from annihilation by pseudo-thinkers. Here, religion is denuded

of all extraneous material (that which has made it disreputable), and limited to certain essential propositions given credence through philosophical discourse. The spiritual dimension of human existence is thus confirmed and reaffirmed.

# 9. CHAPTER NINE

Essay previously unpublished, except on the Internet (2022).

## CAUSAL PRESUPPOSITIONS OF PRAYER

My primary incursion into Theology has been the question of whether the existence of God can be proved or disproved – and my answer has consistently been that we can do neither decisively, but must take that proposition on faith, or refuse it on more or less the same uncertain ground. I have also done work on the issue of the causality of Creation, arguing that God's relation to His Creation would have to be volitional rather than causative, i.e. based on freewill and not on determinism (and even less on chance).

Here I wish to examine the metaphysics of prayer. What are the implications of praying, specifically as regards the causal relationship between God and His Creation? For when I pray (and I do), it is evident that I am *assuming* that God is involved day by day, minute by minute, in the workings of this world. And this, not just for little me, but for everyone and everything. If I even just say 'God be

with me' as I leave my home, I am already assuming God's involvement.

## 1. Varieties of prayers

The term 'prayer' is quite broad, including many utterances about God or aimed at God[107]. Some prayers are **descriptive and/or prescriptive**. A notable example, with both these characters, is the *Shema Israel* prayer[108] in the Jewish prayer book, which is recited by pious Jews morning and evening. For examples, a descriptive element in it are the words "the Lord our God, the Lord is One"; a prescriptive element in it is "Hear Israel", and another further on is "And you shall love the Lord your God…"; and there are many more examples of both.

Many prayers of *praise* are enumerations of God's many powers and qualities; the laudatory aspect being implied by the very act of listing. In the Jewish context, the many and various blessings of God are laudatory prayers; so are many of the psalms. The term 'halleluyah' is a literally call to praise God. Prayers of praise acknowledge and celebrate God's great powers and moral qualities; and are means for expressing one's personal love and respect for Him and devotion to His cause. When such prayers are uttered, one is confirming one's faith in the things said in

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[107] Needless to say, I use the English word God as referring to the Deity of the Jews, even though this word is not Hebrew and not one of His many names in the Jewish sources.

[108] Drawn from Deut. 6:4-9 and 11:13-21, and Num. 15:37-41.

the traditional creed about God and about the behavior He reportedly expects of us.

Mostly, we think of 'prayer' as referring to **petition**, words through which we ask for something from God. The range of our requests is very large, covering all our normal material, mental and spiritual concerns. We may pray for oneself, for one's family and friends, for one's people or country, for all humanity, even for animals. We often pray for understanding and achievement on the spiritual, ethical, intellectual, and behavioral planes; for physical and mental health and longevity; for a fitting spouse and good children; for economic and financial sustenance; for professional capacities and success; for social respect and recognition; for political freedom and justice; for security and victory over evil people; and for harmony and peace.

Turning again for an example to the Jewish prayer book, if we look at the weekdays' *Amidah* (standing prayer, comprising nineteen petitions each ending in a benediction), we can see the great variety of objects that petitionary prayer may have. Briefly put, there is a prayer for support, protection and salvation; another for the gift of life to the dead; another hailing holiness; there are others for knowledge, for penitence, for pardon, for redemption, for healing of the sick, for material and emotional blessings, for ingathering of exiles, for righteousness and justice, for humbling of the arrogant, for mercy towards the righteous, for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, for messianic salvation, for answers to our prayers, for the return of God's presence in Zion, for

gratitude, for enduring strength and peace, and much more[109].

All the prayers in the *Amidah*, note, include praise (blessing) of God, as well as overt or implied petitions. Some include prayers of *thanksgiving*. The latter, it should be noted, may refer to petitionary prayers that have already been answered, or may simply express gratitude for God's constant and manifold goodness towards us even without His waiting for our prayers.

An important form of prayer is *confession and penitence*. In confession we recognize our sins and transgressions, our moral and spiritual failures, our bad behavior; and in penitence we resolve to avoid such foolishness and change our ways for the better. A petition is involved in such prayer: a request for forgiveness. We may ask *questions* of God, hoping for answers. Prayer is communication with God, and sometimes this may take a reproachful turn. Prayers of *complaint* occur when someone has suffered greatly and does not see what the point of it all was. Here, the petition is for release from pain.

Note again that one may pray for oneself or on behalf of others. The same diverse categories of prayer as are found in formal prayer are also found, of course, in informal prayer. All this clearly assumes that God is very actively involved in the minutest details of the world-process long after the moment of Creation as such, including today. Alternatively, we could say that Creation is ongoing, with God fine-tuning His creation as interactively needed.

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109 See David de Sola Pool, *Book of Prayers*.

## 2. Divine providence

So, the act of prayer implies that, in discussing God's causal relation to the world, we must not just posit initial Creation, but must equally take into account *Providence*. And not just occasional punctual providence, but widespread and continual providence, covert if not overt. Without this assumption, our theology of Divine aetiology is obviously very deficient.

Note well that I am not here looking for or proposing some sort of *proof* of God's providence. I do not believe that any strict proof of it is possible. I am merely pointing out that as of the moment one prays one is logically *assuming* the existence of providence. It would be inconsistent to claim that God let the world proceed independently once He created it (as Deism and some earlier philosophies do), and at the same time indulge in any form of prayer to Him.

Needless to say, prayer is not a merely Jewish phenomenon, but is found in many other religious traditions, throughout history and to this day. In that case, the entity prayed to may or may not be God. Of course, the content and emphasis of prayers vary from one tradition to the next – indeed, from one person to the next, and even in different phases of one person's life.

The primary assumption of Jewish prayer is that God is a Person, a purely spiritual being *with consciousness, freewill and values* (somewhat like ours, but infinitely greater, fuller and more accurate), albeit being devoid of materiality or material constraints (unlike us). If anything, God has much more 'personality' than we do, since whereas we are often unconscious or uncertain of what we

are doing, or weak of will, or lacking in purpose or direction, thus resembling impersonal entities, none of these deficiencies can ever be ascribed to God.

Cognition, volition and valuation – in short, the possession of soul or spirit and its three essential functions – are what God has in common (though in widely different degrees) with us humans. His assumed abilities to hear prayer, evaluate the situation, and do something about it, signify continual interaction between Him and us. If God, say, had just issued some arbitrary commandments to us and then altogether withdrew, leaving His relationship with us at that simple level, without accepting feedback from us other than mere obedience or disobedience, our relation to Him would be much less complex than we commonly assume.

In Judaism, no one ought to, in principle, address prayers to anyone but God. We are supposed to have direct access at all times to God's full attention and compassion, with no need of intermediaries. One may obviously, however, ask a live person, ordinary or saintly, to pray to God on one's behalf, for whatever reason. Asking a *dead* person, ordinary or saintly, to pray to God on one's behalf seems more problematic, since doing so is an act loaded with heavy assumptions about the continued existence of that dead person as an individual (albeit as a disembodied soul), and more to the point, that that person can hear one's request and in turn engage in prayer to God. Still more problematic would be to petition a dead person for some active intervention *by* him or her besides mere prayer to God – here, one would be assigning some Godly powers to that person, thereby putting one's monotheism in doubt.

Many Jews do go and pray by the graves of holy ancestors – e.g. at the Cave of Machpelah, Rachel's Tomb, Joseph's Tomb, or King David's Tomb, and by the graves of famous rabbis, like R. Shimon Bar Yochai (in Meron, Israel) or R. Nachman of Breslov (in Uman, Ukraine) – but in principle they there simply recite prayers to God (e.g. Psalms): they do not usually petition the persons who are buried there (though maybe some individuals do so, I don't know)[110]. It is noteworthy that Jews never pray to Moses.

We Jews do, on the Sabbath eve, sing a song addressed to two visiting angels, invisible messengers of God, asking them to bless us on His behalf. This is, to my knowledge, the only Jewish prayer not addressed directly to God (though it could well have been so formulated)[111]. The idea of these angels comes from the Talmud, but the poem is a late composition (introduced by kabbalists circa 1700 CE). This song has rightly received some criticism from prominent rabbis (notably R. Jacob Emden, in his prayer book of 1745), but is now well established in all prayer books. Most people do not reflect on the metaphysical implications of their praying to anyone besides God.

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[110] If they do petition dead persons, perhaps they only ask for intercession by prayer to God on their behalf, rather than for the performance of earthly miracles. I do not know if anyone has investigated this issue empirically.

[111] The poem could easily be fixed by changing the first phrase of each of its verses from the second person to the third person. That is, instead of 'peace be upon you' (*shalom aleichem*) putting 'peace be upon them' (*shalom aleihem*), and so forth.

In any case, our supplications are certainly not addressed to a mere impersonal entity or process or force, say like that implied by the concept of karma (which refers to a supposed 'appropriate reaction, sooner or later, to every action' mechanism of justice-without-mercy programmed in nature). It would be absurd to pray for help to a mere 'it', a deaf and blind, powerless, and indifferent object, devoid of personality – e.g. a stone statue or the Sun or even 'the Universe'.

Buddhists and Hindus (who both believe in karma) do not, of course, pray for help to karma, but rather respectively to buddhas[112] and bodhisattvas, or multiple gods; thereby ascribing to these limited entities supernatural powers capable of changing the course of events (which is somewhat paradoxical, since one's karma is in principle inevitable and unavoidable until and unless one attains liberation/enlightenment). Sundry remaining pagans or idolaters do seemingly worship inanimate material objects, although most of them perhaps regard their idols as mere conduits to a more 'living' entity (e.g. a particular 'spirit' or a 'demon' or whatever).

Christians and Muslims do pray to the God of monotheism, according to major Jewish commentators.

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[112] I think anyway that when ordinary Buddhists pray to 'the Buddha' they are unconsciously in effect praying to God. Their prayers in such cases are directed towards 'Heaven', rather than towards an enlightened man, i.e. the historical founder of Buddhism, or to a statue thereof. Even so, it does seem (to an outsider like me) that they regard the statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas as having some life and personality of their own. I refer here to popular Buddhism, as distinct from the more intellectual normative religion(s).

But Christians often tend to rather pray to Jesus (whom they openly view as a divine being, and not merely as a human intercessor)[113], and to sundry (in their eyes) saints alive or long dead. As for Muslims, they seem to consider their 'prophet' Muhammed as a quasi-divine being, since they regard any criticism of him as 'blasphemy'[114]. They do, I gather, address some words of salutation to him in

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[113] Christians believe in a 'trinity', the father (of Jesus), the son (Jesus), and the holy ghost (apparently, a reification of the divine spirit active in the world), which they consider not as three distinct gods but as three aspects of one and the same godhead. In my personal view, this does not qualify as 'monotheism' in the sense Judaism attaches to the term. Christians, of course, regard their 'father' figure as corresponding to the Jewish concept of God, since that was historically the source of their notion. But they are not in fact identical ideas, but radically different ones, because Judaism certainly rejects the fantasies of God incarnating in human form or having a divine human offspring (such fantasies being distinctly pagan – as evidenced by their presence in pre-Judaic religions and in polytheist Hinduism). I do not intend this remark to be offensive, but only accurate. We often speak of the 'three monotheistic faiths', for the sake of peace between our three population groups (which is of course very desirable); but in an intellectual discussion we are duty-bound to be lucid and honest.

[114] To my mind, applying the term 'blasphemy' to criticism of Muhammed constitutes idolatry; all the more so since such accusation is sometimes coupled with heavy corporal, even capital, punishment. We often read of such harsh sentences being meted out even today in fanatic Islamic regimes like Pakistan, Iran or Saudi Arabia. I must say, I have little respect for any faith that resorts to or tolerates religious terrorism in this day and age.

their daily prayers[115]; but I do not know (have not yet tried investigating) whether they ever address any petitions to him, which would constitute deviation from monotheistic practice[116].

Prayer in front of images (in two or three dimensions) representing some god or saint is practiced not only by

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[115] Muslims do address words (in the second person) to Muhammed in some daily prayers, e.g. when they say "Peace be on you, O Prophet." This implies they believe that he is alive somewhere (in 'heaven', presumably) and able to hear their millions of daily salutations from afar. But those particular words do not constitute a prayer of petition; they only add up to a salutation. I do not know if there are, in Muslim prayers, words addressed to Muhammed which constitute petitions to him.

[116] Regarding the 'monotheism' of Islam, I would like here to reiterate what I have said in previous works. Although it is known and indubitable that Muhammed's idea of Allah was derived from the Jewish teaching of God, it does not follow that these concepts exactly correspond. This is evident from the words attributed to Allah against Jews in Koran and Hadith (scripture and oral tradition), words that could not conceivably ever have been uttered by the God of the Jews (to a non-Jew, to boot). The two deities cannot truly be considered one and the same, since their alleged thoughts, words and deeds are not mutually consistent. It is not a matter of their having different divine names, but of the content and connotations of their names, i.e. the different religious beliefs encapsulated in them. There is some overlap in beliefs, but not all beliefs are held in common; and the differences are significant. Therefore, the monotheism (i.e. worship of a unique, single, overriding god) of Muslims is not identical with that of Jews – an effectively different 'theos' is involved, though each is claimed to be one and only. The term 'monotheism' does not have a unitary, exclusive reference; it is rather vague regarding the god intended. Again, I do not intend this remark to be offensive, but only accurate.

Hindus and Buddhists, but also by Catholic and Orthodox Christians; but (to their credit) not by Protestant Christians[117] or Muslims or Jews. The idea behind such prayer is presumably that the statue or illustration 'channels' the prayer to the person the image 'represents'. Or maybe, the idea is more simply that the image helps the worshipper to focus his attention on the faraway person worshipped. In any case, God is too abstract a concept to be represented in material images[118].

It should be said that although all adherents to a certain religion ostensibly pray to the same godly person, they may not in fact have identical conceptions of that person; one might even go so far as to say that every individual necessarily has a somewhat different de facto conception. In Judaism, it is evident that different commentators have somewhat different conceptions of God; and there have been many different schools of thought across time. Notably, within the Talmud, among the medieval commentators, among the mystics, in Hasidism, and in modern times, we can observe different viewpoints and sometimes marked controversies among commentators.

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[117] However, I presume that Protestants do have a mental image of Jesus when they pray to him.

[118] Although Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel paintings by comes to mind, where God is depicted as a superb old man. Statues and illustrations, of course, serve the religion concerned, as an institution, by reminding all passers-by of its gods and saints; they are, as well as spiritual reminders, expressions of social and political power held by the institution and its guardians. A similar role is played, for religions that do not resort to statues and illustrations, by abstract symbols like the cross, the crescent or the six-pointed star or by selected words and phrases.

Notwithstanding, these are all regarded as referring to one and the same God, the God of Judaism.

The point to stress here is that whatever one's conception, whether one prays to God or to some other god or to a saint, such praying implicitly ascribes certain powers, indeed superpowers, supernatural powers, to the deity or saint addressed. In petitionary prayer, the addressee is assumed able to hear the prayer and to respond to it at will. Otherwise, one would not bother praying. Praying is not the same as mere wishing or hoping, which are passive expressions; by praying for something we attempt to positively *affect* the course of events, albeit indirectly.

### 3. Divine interference in nature and human lives

And of course, this discussion takes us straight into the minefield of *theodicy* (discussions on the justice of God): why does God not help good people when He ought to do so (in our eyes), and also why does he apparently helps bad people when he ought not to do so (in our eyes)? For even if we grant the general principle that God abstains from interference in the affairs of his creatures (individual humans in particular, but also individual animals, and maybe even individual plants), it is often unclear why He would abstain in certain particular cases or situations for which (again in our eyes) abstinence brings no benefit whatever to His creation but on the contrary perhaps bring great damage to it.

Notably, it is absurd to claim that God did not kill the likes of Hitler or Stalin or Mao early on in their careers, because He wanted to give these evil individuals time to either

damn themselves fully or to grow spiritually and choose good over evil! The obvious question to ask here is: what about their millions of *victims*, the overwhelming majority of who were innocent of any crime deserving the horrific suffering they endured in one way or another – why were *they* not given a lifetime to grow spiritually and do good? Why were their many and urgent prayers and screams not heard? The same can be said regarding other, lesser murderers and sundry monsters, of course.

Clearly, the thesis that God allows evil to grow and act in order to make room for human freewill, while it sounds reasonable initially if thus vaguely formulated, does not stand up to scrutiny if considered in more detail. The issue is: whose freewill is being more protected, the good people's or the bad people's? Just how is the world's spiritual development improved when relatively or absolutely evil people are given, for any lapse of time, power of life and death over relatively or absolutely good people? We have no plausible answers to such radical questions.

Some thinkers claim that after the initial act of creation God has abstained from interfering in human affairs so as to ensure our freedom of the will and moral responsibility. But there is clearly a contradiction of sorts between this particular theistic (notably Deist) claim, which would involve at best mechanical karma (which is empirically not evident), and the widespread belief among most monotheists that we can pray to God and expect Him to interfere in the detailed manner already indicated, out of justice and mercy.

Prayer necessarily implies continual and intentional Divine interference in the world process, or at least in the

lives of humans. God's interference is logically implied by petitionary prayers, which look forward to possible events, before the fact; and equally by prayers of thanksgiving and even of praise, which look back on past or current events, after the fact.

The big question is, of course, how such interference might be compatible with Natural Law. But, regarding this issue, the thesis that God's intervention occurs, as it were, *behind the scenes*, in ways that are not perceived inductively when we empirically observe and conceptually formulate (using the scientific method) apparent natural laws, is easy to deal with logically. This statement can be understood if we keep in mind that all our assumed 'natural laws' are ultimately based on generalization of a relatively limited number of observations – never on complete enumeration of all occurrences of the phenomena concerned in the whole universe and throughout time.

It is not theoretically inconceivable that God might abstain from breaking an apparent law while it is publicly being scrutinized by scientists; and yet go ahead and break it when no one is watching! This could be said of any natural law, even (say) one as certain to contemporary science as the law of conservation of matter and energy. In any case, if perchance we spotted a breach of the law, we would simply consider such breach as a perfectly natural phenomenon – and particularize the previous formulation of the law, making it less general, more conditional. But in such event, it could be said that God deliberately revealed the irregularity because He wanted us to narrow

the presumed law's scope[119]. So, there is really no possible logical objection to conceiving God as engaged in 'hidden' breaches of natural law, possibly without ever being 'found out' (if He chose not to be).

This is even truer when we consider medical phenomena, which are not subject to such hard and fast rules, but rather to probabilities, due to multiple conditions of causation and acts of volition being involved in them. Thus, if a person is suffering from a very problematic disease and prays to God for a cure, or someone prays on his or her behalf; and that person quite unexpectedly suddenly recovers (as happens occasionally), it is not unthinkable that a miracle did indeed occur, i.e. that God actually interfered in some way (for instance, by secretly weakening or killing off attacking viruses) and cured the seemingly hopeless case. There is no way to prove this was indeed what happened; but on the other hand, there is no incontrovertible basis for skepticism. The same uncertainty applies to preventive supplications, asking God for protection from eventual dangers in general or specifically.

If one prays for good or bad and the requested event takes place, one cannot conclude that one's prayer (let alone all prayer) was effective, as this would constitute *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacious argument (and for all prayer, added generalization). If one prays for good or bad and the

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[119] For all we know, the seemingly lawless, indeterministic behavior of subatomic particle-wave phenomena might be due – not to natural spontaneity as current science assumes – but to intentional, purposeful choices and acts of will by God, i.e. by God acting on the minutest details of Nature's unfolding. There is simply no way for us to tell the difference!

opposite occurred, one cannot infer that prayer in general is useless, as it is conceivable that God decided not to grant this particular petition but might still choose to satisfy others.[120]

Furthermore, many of our prayers have more to do with mental/spiritual issues than with material/physiological ones. We may pray for mental health, for insight and wisdom, for courage and strength, for happiness, for familial, social, economic and political success, and so forth. Such prayers are obviously requests for Divine intervention into our own souls or minds, and/or those of others. These issues are not directly or exclusively related to the laws of material nature that physicists, chemists, biologists, astronomers, and the practitioners of other relatively exact sciences, are concerned with.

God is here, clearly, assumed to be able to affect at will our inner, psychological situation, as much as the bodily (including the nervous system) and material environment of our lives. Such interference might take many forms: it might consist in *blocking* a person's intended act of will (affecting the internal causative environment of volition), or making a person's act of willing or of abstaining from some will *more or less difficult* as appropriate (influencing

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[120] This conundrum is illustrated in the Biblical book of Jonah (4:1-2). Jonah was ordered by God to call on Nineveh to repent or face destruction; it seems that he tried to avoid doing so because he thought that if Nineveh repented he would be made ridiculous since his warning of destruction would not have come true. But that was invalid reasoning in that we cannot estimate *ex post facto* what was initially decreed to occur (destruction in this case) merely by looking at what did ultimately occur (repentance and non-destruction).

volition through consciousness of some positive or negative consideration), or simply making the person's volition *successful or unsuccessful* by controlling the external causal (causative or volitional) environment.

The claim here is that God can indeed invisibly manipulate our brains and body and surrounds, and even (through influence rather than determinism) our soul's efforts – *without* thereby denying the principle of freedom of the will (human or other). There is little expectation that science might *detect* such manipulations, today or ever in the future. The claim is therefore necessarily speculative, an issue of faith – though certainly abstractly conceivable and not logically impossible.

Thus, our resort to prayer implies that God is potentially actively involved in our individual and collective lives, and perhaps equally that of other animal species and even of plants (as when people pray for the wellbeing of their livestock or crops), in a very detailed way and at many levels. What sort of interference in nature would that have to be? Obviously, God might intervene on His own initiative, independently of prayer; but where prayer was involved, God can be construed as having heard the prayer and made a decision to intervene (or not), based on ad hoc justice and mercy considerations, and His wider plans and goals for the person or people concerned, and even for the whole world.

Thus, the central assumption of praying is that God *hears* all prayer and may freely choose to consciously respond positively to it by means of pointed *conscious acts of will* on His part. The assumption is that He relates causally to the world by intentional volition on a day-to-day basis, not merely at the first act of creation.

Some commentators claim that the assumption of petitionary prayer is that we have the power to change God's mind by its means. This is a silly objection, because we do not force God to change His mind – He changes His own mind by freewill. Some rebut that God never changes His mind and therefore that prayer is useless. There is no basis for such claim, because there is no a priori impossibility that God might keep an open mind and adapt His decisions to changing circumstances. After all, we believe that He has given us freewill, and therefore accepts a measure of moment-by-moment uncertainty in the unfolding of the world[121].

Without doubt, God does not need our prayers to know what is going on at a given time and to make decisions; but when we petition Him, we presumably voluntarily add *an additional factor* which may well (or may not) tip the scales on our behalf. That added factor may simply be the recognition by us, in the act of petitioning, that God is in charge of things and is the One to appeal to in all circumstances. By praying for valuable and virtuous outcomes, we show God that we are, or wish to be, on His side, the side of good, and we acknowledge His justice and

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[121] This said leaving apart the issue of Divine knowledge across time, of past, present, and future events, which can be said to occur on a higher level. I have addressed this issue elsewhere, explaining that just as we experience the present as an extended moment (albeit small) of time, rather than as a mere instant (i.e. point) of time, so presumably for God the present is a moment so greatly extended that it englobes all past and present and future events in one sweep. Thus, God can conceivably see our volitional choices beyond time without affecting our freedom.

mercy. That may be all that is needed to tip the scales in our favor with regard to the issue at hand.

## 4. The spiritual side of existence

While there is no technical reason to doubt the possibility of Divine providence, we can still of course ask why God would intervene at all, knowing that we are tiny inhabitants of a tiny planet in a tiny solar system, which is one of billions in a tiny galaxy, which is in turn one of billions in the known universe, which might in turn be but one of billions of universes in a yet unknown infinite multiverse! Given that we are individually and collectively truly minute entities, mere specks of dust – why would a God who created such a massive world have any interest in us? We would not adopt microbes as pets; why would God adopt us? When the world was thought to be relatively small, we could well imagine that we humans have some importance in the scheme of things; but now we know better, it seems far less likely.

But the answer to that objection could be that the vastness of material creation is relatively unimportant compared to the less visible spiritual sphere of existence. In this parallel 'dimension' or 'domain' of existence, which is perhaps God's own 'substance', whose 'light' all human souls are but tiny 'sparks' of[122], our lives may well have great

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[122] I put all these terms in inverted commas to signify that they are only intended as rough analogies and not to be taken literally. To speak of spirituality, we are forced to appeal somewhat to material notions of substance or place; but that is

significance in God's eyes, inciting Him to engage in micromanagement of the material and mental aspects of our existences for our spiritual benefit. The thing to keep in mind when considering this deeper issue is that the world is clearly not the merely material entity that modern science dogmatically assumes. It is still quite materialist and has *not even begun* to deal with the mysteries of consciousness and volition in any credible detailed manner.

For a start, most philosophers and scientists have not yet realized that there is an inconsistency in their theory that what we perceive in sense-perception (especially of sights and sounds) are *mental images of* external objects rather than the external objects (or aspects thereof) *themselves*. If all we ever perceived were mental images, there would be no thought of or basis for claiming external objects, and therefore no way to ever test the validity or not of our perceptions. Clearly, the fact of perception is much more mysterious than it seems at first blush, and we are still very far from understanding it theoretically.

Likewise, our current theories of the material universe do not take into consideration, let alone explain in sufficiently deep and convincing ways, the amazing facts of consciousness and volition. There are currently many efforts to empirically demonstrate that living matter mechanically evolves from inanimate matter under certain circumstances; but even if that is proven, it will still be necessary to find mathematical formulas which predict and explain such derivation, and those are still very far off.

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mere imagery, not implying that such notions are really applicable.

There are certainly to date no mathematical formulas that lead from living matter to consciousness and volition. Consciousness and volition cannot to date be scientifically predicted and explained from known laws of physics; they are not covered by those laws. Modern biology prefers to avoid these subjects, as does physics theory, because they are still much too abstruse for us.

Indeed, even with regard to inanimate matter and physical life, while modern science has made very impressive progress in *describing* the evolution of matter and then life from the Big Bang to this day on our Earth, it has not so far succeeded in *explaining why* existents and the laws of nature controlling them are as they are and not otherwise. I am not just referring to the obvious questions of how the initial substance which exploded came to at all be and how it came to suddenly explode, but moreover to all the details of material evolution that followed. How come the original energy or matter *had it programmed within itself* to evolve in the complicated ways that it did, forming light, more and more complex elementary particles, then molecules, and ultimately life and then consciousness and volition? Why were the formative forces involved (gravity, electromagnetism, etc.) as we have found them to be and not otherwise? Modern science just takes these natural events as givens – but they are still very mysterious and likely to stay that way forever.

All this said in passing, to remind us that atheism is far from triumphantly established and that we have good reason to continue wondering at the miracle of existence! Note well, however, that this does not mean that the creation narrative found in the Torah (and other such religious tracts), the timing and sequence of events there proposed, taken literally, has any credibility left today. It

is already certain that things proceeded very differently in fact. Sad, but true[123]. Fundamentalists refuse to admit it or try hard to ignore it, but they only fool themselves because the evidence in favor of the current scientific viewpoint is overwhelming.

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[123] It would be nice if religious belief was still today as in the past a simple affair; but things have become far more complex, and the believer has to work his or her way through the intellectual difficulties now involved. The important thing is to remain scrupulously honest at all times: there is no virtue in faking solutions to problems or pretending there are no problems to solve. The most absurd and dishonest general argument often used by apologists (in print and orally) is to say that since scientific theories are open to debate and yield only probable conclusions, and are constantly changing, they are no better indeed less reliable than faith-based claims. (Imagine if such a standard was used in a court of law, and the judge preferred an established prejudice devoid of proof to the evolving results of detailed field investigations and careful reasoning – inevitably, an innocent man would be condemned or a guilty one would be cleared.) Science is an inductive discipline, based on precise empirical studies and stringent logical arguments, all peer reviewed (this is ideally true, although it must be acknowledged that sometimes unscientific ideologies with political motives are peddled as science). Serious science certainly does not consist of pure leaps of faith like religious claims do. It necessarily evolves over time as research uncovers new factual data and proposes new hypotheses for their explanation. That is so because man is not omniscient and never will be. He must work hard to find the nearest thing to truth that he can at any given stage of research. At each stage, the proposed scientific view is in principle more intellectually reliable than those at all the preceding stages (including prescientific doctrines). This dynamic adaptation to new information and ideas is the very virtue and value of science, which distinguishes its claims from static religious dogma.

Notwithstanding, belief in God as Creator and as Providence is not logically affected by the scientific debunking of the Biblical scenario, even if some ideological atheists claim otherwise. Such belief is still rationally sustainable, for the simple reason that, being a spiritual hypothesis, it can adapt to any material conditions. It is not falsifiable by any discovery relating to matter. Provided we do not attach our belief in God to any given creation thesis, but always accept the latest scientific verdict as the best bet, we can always retort 'well, that's the way God chose to do things'!

## 5. The utility and value of prayer

The prime *purpose* of petitionary prayer is to call for God's attention on something of interest to us. We presume God is already, always and everywhere, aware of everything that is going on – yet we call on Him to deal with some particular subject of personal or communal interest to us. This signifies that the act of prayer carries some weight in God's evaluation of the situation at hand – so that He usually or frequently acts differently when someone has prayed than He would have otherwise. Perhaps more urgently or slowly, or more favorably (more justly or more mercifully), as appropriate. Thus, prayer is granted value and efficacy by God – presumably because the one praying thereby gains merit and establishes a closer relation to Him.

Since petitionary prayer depends on Divine approval, it is not invariably efficacious; whence it follows that the efficacy of prayer cannot be proved (nor disproved)

scientifically but must be taken on faith. Even so, prayer always has a potentially beneficial psychological effect, giving us hope and courage in difficult or dangerous situations. Sometimes, just believing that God is there, ready to give us help and support in case of need, suffices to buttress our understanding and courage, and give us hope, improving our chances of success. Someone like me, who has faith in and recourse to prayer, cannot comprehend how people who don't pray manage to get through life's difficulties.

Regarding the causal efficacy of petitionary prayers, nothing can be proved, or disproved, by empirical and statistical means. When we pray, we know in advance that there is no certainty that our prayer will be favorably received and answered as we wish; still, we pray and hope for that. It is obvious to us that God has His own agenda, and He may opt either way. Perhaps He always responds positively, to our benefit, but not necessarily in the precise way that we imagined and desired.

Nevertheless, those of us who pray can testify subjectively to the miraculous efficacy of prayer. There have been times in my personal experience when I earnestly tried and tried again and again to overcome some failing or weakness within me, yet I could not muster the courage or will needed. Then, through prayer, I suddenly found myself relieved of the fear or bad habit worrying me. I knew full well that it wasn't my own doing, the independent power my will, that solved the problem, since I had tried repeatedly, unsuccessfully to control myself. Just uttering prayers did not change my mind, either, since my prayers were not immediately answered. It was obvious to me, when release finally came, that I owed it to

God's gracious help. I think most people who pray have had similar experiences.

All that has been said above applies equally, of course, to formal and informal prayer. In Judaism, formal prayers are those given in the standard prayer books, which were composed by rabbis over many centuries using material found in the Bible and other traditional literature. These prayers purport to give voice to every occasion, situation, and need, albeit in a general way; and they may concern the community as a whole, as well as the individual. Informal prayers may likewise be communal or individual, but they are composed ad hoc spontaneously.

One might think that formal prayers are less valuable than informal ones, as they are uttered regularly, in some cases two or three times daily, and can easily become rote; but in truth, while one may say much of them unconsciously by force of habit, very often in the recitation some word or phrase or sentence or paragraph stands out with special force. Moreover, the formal prayers cover much ground, so that almost no normal need or kosher desideratum is forgotten; as a result, informal prayers are rarely required (which does not mean they are not valuable).

Of course, a spontaneous prayer, be it a cry for help or an expression of gratitude, is often more passionate and deeply heartfelt than a ritual one. But sometimes the opposite is true: saying ritual prayers in the company of other people can sometimes greatly enhance one's sense of contact with God and stimulate strong emotional reactions. This is no doubt why Jews preferably pray in groups of ten or more.

While the main purpose of prayer is communicating with God – by way of all kinds of supplication (including

confession and begging for forgiveness), or praise and thanksgiving (acknowledging God's great qualities and creative and helpful acts) – prayer has many valuable *side-effects*.

In particular, it is worth focusing on the side-benefits of formal prayer. First, the contents of our set prayers are *a daily teaching and reminder* of Judaic values and disvalues, virtues and vices – telling us what is good or bad, what to do or avoid – and of Jewish history and hopes. Second, just uttering the prayers constitutes a statement of belief in God and the things they say. Third, having to recite certain prayers daily or weekly or seasonally, at specified times of the day, constitutes a beneficial *discipline*, structuring our days and tying us to our religion. Fourth, this is also *meditation*, since it demands our attention to the words uttered and concentration on their meanings.[124]

While such prayer tends to become rote to varying extent; it is never in truth devoid of intentionality (Heb. *kavanah*). Rather, it is similar to what occurs during silent meditation: we *weave in and out* of attentiveness, thinking of other things for a while and then returning to the meanings of the words uttered for a while. We may focus

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[124] Jewish prayer is normally in Hebrew. For those who lack, or are not fluent in, Hebrew, there are prayer books with translation into other languages. God is presumed to (obviously) understand all languages, so there is not a big problem in that respect. Nevertheless, Hebrew is preferred because it is the language the prayers were composed in and are recited in in synagogues, and it sounds very nice. For these reasons, many people who do not understand Hebrew still prefer to pray in that language if they are able to read it.

on some parts of our prayer for a while, and then get distracted by unrelated memories, issues or plans (or external events) for a stretch. Our degree of awareness of the prayers varies, going from high to low intensity and back again, depending on our energy level at the time.

Singing out loud with other congregants in the synagogue, and indeed all active participation in the many rituals, is a good way momentarily forget one's problems or desires and to focus more fully on praying.

Sometimes, we may seem to be engaged in nothing more than lip service. But it would be unfair to so characterize our prayers if we recite them daily, weekly, or however regularly, when we already know and adhere to what they mean. We may be paying less attention to what we say right now than we ought to ideally, but still we do somewhat remember, and habitually subscribe to, the words uttered. This may be a weak form of *kavanah*, but it is still *kavanah*. This is like when we say 'Amen' to a prayer uttered by the cantor in the synagogue even though we did not actually hear what he said: we are confident of subscribing to whatever he said.

Thus, we always get at least some benefit from the formal prayers recited, even if not all the benefit we might have gotten with ideal degrees of mental effort. Even so, it is of course mandatory to try our best to pray with maximum concentration, so as to get the full benefit of the exercise. But sometimes, admittedly, we are simply too tired to be able to deliver; we are only human.

Anyway, all prayer is meaningful and valuable as an act of worship, as a statement of our belief in God and His providence and of our inspired choice of devotion to Him. Even when we pray without concentration – cursorily,

speedily, while thinking of a multitude of other things, or because we are short of time – our prayer still embodies a significant sacrifice of our time, i.e. the gift of a part of our life we could have used in other ways. Prayer thus constitutes, at a minimum, a bit of self-sacrifice. Sometimes, this is all we want to do – merely to connect to God.

Another important side-benefit of prayer is that it makes us *more God-conscious* in our everyday lives, and thus enhances our spirituality and spiritual proximity to Him. The more we pray, formal or informal supplications and blessings, the more aware are we of God's presence in the world, and thus the closer we are to Him. That is why it is recommended by some great teachers to engage in a frequent if not continual 'dialogue' with God, at every opportunity asking for His help and support, apologizing for one's errors or misdeeds, thanking Him for His gifts, and so on – as if chatting with a human person one is living with here and now. To be sure, God does not ordinarily (unless you are a prophet, which is extremely unlikely nowadays) talk back in so many words; but one may with faith observe concrete results that may be regarded as His replies.

And of course, God-consciousness, i.e. the constant awareness through faith that God indeed exists and is actively involved in the world we reside in, encourages us to do good and abstain from bad, in thought, speech and action. In God's assumed presence, we are on our best behavior; and our mood is more optimistic and joyful. Inversely, if we sin we can (if we have any conscience left) feel the dismal loss and distancing from God which follows the sin. These experiences constitute additional valuable practical consequences of regular prayer.

Yet another wonderful side-benefit of prayer is due to the *sincerity* prayer demands. Since, we believe, God knows everything about us, including all our innermost emotions and thoughts, and all our most secret deeds, we cannot when we address Him pretend to be what we are not[125]. This is especially true of spontaneous personal prayer; but also, to a large extent, of fixed ritual prayers if we recite them with awareness of the meanings of their words. Since God knows precisely what is in our hearts, and all details of our daily conduct, even more clearly than we do, we cannot be hypocritical but must be scrupulously honest with Him. We cannot fool Him, even when we are able to fool ourselves or others; we must speak truly. Therefore, if only incidentally, prayer tends to increase our inner consistency and self-knowledge, which in turn improves our mental serenity.

It should be pointed out, however, with regard to introspection, that there is some conflict of purpose between verbal prayer and silent meditation. Their psychology differs. In the former, particularly in prayer of penitence, the mind may be stirred-up by verbose self-examination and self-reproach, sometimes in a frenzied manner; whereas, in the latter, based on inner silence, the mind is rather allowed to settle down, and naturally reach clarity and peace.

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[125] It should be said in passing that nothing is to be gained by resorting to alcohol, marijuana, or other drugs for the purpose of prayer. On the contrary, use of these substances makes any prayer insincere, since it is not the person one really is who is then praying but an artificial, modified version of oneself.

Excessive speech, in thought or orally, can sometimes take us far from true self-knowledge, when it attempts to force on us mental insight from the outside, as it were, by means of cliché ideas and labels. On the other hand, admittedly, silent meditation, whose usual effect is to make the mind more transparent to inner scrutiny and more honest, can occasionally dull the mind or make us blind to our faults through ego pride (although, even in such cases, if one continues meditating the shortcomings eventually fall away).

In fact, regular practice of silent meditation greatly enhances regular prayer because it calms and clarifies our mind and strengthens our immunity to internal and external distractions, increasing our capacity of attention and concentration so that we can more consciously and powerfully direct our thoughts and words towards God. Instead of merely reciting prayers, we get to mentally aim them heavenward. Silent meditation is practiced sitting down, in an erect and still (yet relaxed) posture, during at least half an hour at a time, at least once a day, and allowing the mind to gently and naturally settle down. If this is done not long before prayer, the effect on it is tangible. But even if done regularly at other times of the day or night, it makes a remarkable difference.

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