

NEOPLATONIST THEOLOGY AND GOD'S RELEVANCE

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Abstract. I raise the issue over why human beings should be concerned with God even if He created the world and even if He is responsible for Morality. I describe God's apparent irrelevance to human beings. In response, I consider and reject a Neo-Aristotelian solution. Instead I propose a Neoplatonist approach, which is cautiously endorsed. The nature of participation is briefly discussed. As an illustration, I consider free will from a Neoplatonist point of view. Jewish and Christian approaches to perfection are then contrasted. I conclude with the advantages of Neoplatonism over Neo-Aristotelianism.

I. GOD'S PROBLEM

Human beings think they have problems. But God has problems too. Despite all His power, knowledge and goodness, God has the problem of seeming irrelevant to human beings. Why should they take any notice of Him? From the human point of view, even if God exists and is all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good, that does not make Him of immediate relevance to how human beings live their lives, and to their practical reasoning, apart from perhaps being a source of knowledge of how to live, or a source of incentives and disincentives. But these do not give human beings reasons to care about God in His own right. Despite His impressive *curriculum vitae*, God is vulnerable to feeling unloved. He seems to be irrelevant in Himself to our lives, apart from making a difference to how to achieve other things we care about. This is God's irrelevance problem.

It might be objected that something important has been left out: God is not supposed just to be a contemplative disembodied person who sits around approving of things, knowing things, and kindly letting us know things. He is also supposed to be the *creator* of the physical world, including us. The thought is: God created us and that's why we should do what He wants. (See, for example, Hirsch 1962.) We are His property. However, the relevance of this is not obvious. Consider people who have been bred to be slaves or gladiators. That is their function in a sense — that is why they exist. Nevertheless, it surely does not determine what they should do. Suppose a slave was bred to be a gladiator in ancient Rome in order to fight for glory in the Coliseum, and he is owned by a leading Roman gladiatorial combat promoter. However, instead of being a gladiator, his own inclination might be to follow a career in gardening or dancing. Such a career might suit him better than being a gladiator, even if he is very good at being a gladiator. He does not somehow owe it to the Roman gladiatorial combat promoter to be a gladiator if his heart is set on a different career. Likewise, the mere fact that God created us does not necessarily mean that we owe Him anything, any more than slaves owe their owners the duty of obedience, just because they were responsible for the slaves' existence. Of course, God has power over us, just as a slave-owner has power over his or her slaves. But that just means that we should *fear* Him, not that we should love, respect or obey Him. He would not be a source of rightful allegiance. Such a bossy and dictatorial God can hardly dictate what my duties are. One might even challenge such a God, saying: "Hey, who do you think you are? God?"!

One can almost feel sorry for God. He creates the world and creates each of us, and yet we can still say sarcastically to him, like a petulant stroppy teenager, "That sure was impressive God, in a way, but so

what? What's the big deal? It doesn't mean I owe you anything", before slamming the bedroom door and turning up the volume of recorded music.

Many people think that as well as creating the material world, God also lays down the moral rules. But that doesn't help because those petulant teenagers, human beings, may retort, "That sure was also impressive God, in a way, and I suppose I agree that I should follow the rules that you are responsible for, since they are after all the moral rules. But now, having performed your legislating heroics, you drop out of the picture. You can retire now. Bye bye God! Neither creating the physical world nor morality mean I owe *you* anything".

Like many a parent of teenage children, God might complain, in exasperation: "What's a god got to do to get these people's attention?!" He might continue, "Look, I slave away making the world and laying down morality and still it is not good enough for these annoying ungrateful human beings. I'm tempted to do some of my meaner miracles. At least a lot of locusts and hail. But then they will probably just resent me, and even if the miracles are spectacular or nice, they will probably say 'So what?' These people are annoying. Maybe I'll send them another catastrophic flood; oh yeah, I nearly forgot, I promised I wouldn't do that"

II. NEO-ARISTOTELIANISM

Given these difficulties, many would say that we should reach for some kind of Neo-Aristotelian theological view. One such thinker was Moses Maimonides, who famously discusses the *reasons* for the commandments in his work *Guide for the Perplexed* (Maimonides 1958: book 3). Maimonides states what he thinks are the reasons for many of the commandments, and the reasons why we ought to respect them, without bringing God into the equation. The reason in most cases is that the commandments are good for us, either individually or as a community. There could be some exceptions, where we do not know the reasons, yet we must still follow them. Perhaps the grounds for following those commandments are inductive or held on authority, which we trust for other reasons. Apart from those cases, Maimonides thinks that God gave the law for our good. Indeed, the *Torah* (= "Pentateuch") of the Hebrew bible represents Moses as saying so many times. No wonder, then, that Maimonides is happy to incorporate the commandments into a broadly Aristotelian framework in his *Eight Chapters* (Maimonides 1975). It looks as if God, in telling us what to do, is giving us *knowledge* of what is good and right for us. He is not *making* it good and right by divine fiat, or by extraordinary edict. The only respect in which He creates good and right is by creating human beings with an essence that embody the good and right for us. But, having made us, the good and right flow from our essence, and God is thus indirectly responsible for that good and right.

However, by itself, this neo-Aristotelian approach does not seem to help with the problem of God's irrelevance. On the neo-Aristotelian approach, the moral rules are supposed to be somehow for our good. And that means that moral rules give us reasons because our good gives us reasons. But on this conception, God drops out of the picture in His own right, once again. Neo-Aristotelianism has been prominent in Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions for over a millennium. Nevertheless, that marriage looks peculiar and unstable. It is true that Neo-Aristotelianism succeeds in connecting the good of human beings and God's existence and activities. It might be true that if God created human beings, then by doing that He sets up good and bad for those creatures by creating their distinctive essences. However, it remains the case that having created human beings with their essences, and thus with the goods and bads that follow from those essences, God still drops out of the picture. What matters is living in accordance with our essence. No human being need give God a thought, except insofar as they need to negotiate incentives or have curiosity about antique origins.

III. NEOPLATONISM

I would like to suggest that there is another ‘Neo-’ that view does better — and that is Neoplatonism. According to Neoplatonist theology, human beings ‘participate in’ or ‘have a share in’ God. On this view, human beings are not utterly distinct existences from God; and this has the consequence that God is of immediate concern to human beings. Instead of God’s relation to human beings being like that between exasperated parents and awkward rebellious teenage children, it is more like the relation between a thing and its reflection in a mirror, or a seal and its impression in clay.¹ Or perhaps it is like the relation between an early foetus in its mother’s womb and the mother of that foetus — not distinct yet not identical. Such a view seems to do better in addressing what has been worrying us. Whatever “participate” or “share” mean, exactly, if human beings participate in God or in His essence, or if they have a share in God or in His essence, it means that taking God seriously is a way of taking oneself seriously, and we cannot take ourselves seriously unless we take God seriously. So says the Neoplatonist.

The more specific Neoplatonist idea I have in mind is that it is only the human *mind*, or rather a crucial part of it, that participates, or shares, in the *mind* of God (Philo 1929, XXIII: 29; see also Afterman 2016, chapter 2). It is not the whole biological human being, including toenails, or even the whole human mind, including itches. It is just a select higher part of the human mind that participates in or shares in God.

Of course, thus far, the relation of participation or sharing has been left underspecified. Nevertheless, in whichever way it is cashed out, there is a significant contrast with the Neo-Aristotelianism, according to which there is a large existential gulf between God and human beings. On that Neo- view, God just happens to be responsible for the existence and essence of human beings; and the essences of human beings just happen to be *like* the essence of their creator (Maimondes 1958: Book 1, section 1). That still leaves a problematic metaphysical gap between the two. The two haecceities are completely distinct. This is not true of a Neoplatonist participation view. On that view, the relation is more intimate.

IV. PARTICIPATION

There is no denying that a Neoplatonist has the tough task of describing the participation relation. However, we can at least say what it is *not*. In particular, it is not the part-whole relation, and it is not the constitution relation. If human beings were literally *parts* of God, or if they partly *constituted* God, then God would not and could not exist if human beings did not exist, which is unsatisfactory. The participation relation is *less* intimate than the part-whole and constitution relations. And participation is not merely a dependence relation, which can obtain between two completely distinct things. The participation relation is *more* intimate than that. So, participation must be something else.

Someone might complain that the if the participation or sharing relation cannot be explained in other terms, that is ‘game-over’ for the Neoplatonist. But this is over hasty. The Neoplatonist theist’s idea is, or should be, that *part* of human beings, their mind, or a special part of their mind, is at least *not wholly distinct* from God, just as the blueness of blue things is not wholly distinct from blueness, for Plato. Even though the Neoplatonist denies that God and human beings stand in part-whole and constitution relations, the Neoplatonist goes beyond dependence and says that there is no complete distinctness even though there is no identity. It must be admitted that the relation is obscure; yet it is the one that obtains between universals and instances. So, we are stuck with it. A blue thing is not part of, nor does it constitute, blueness. It is less intimate than that. And while the blueness of things does depend on blueness, participation is more than dependence. A set may depend on its members despite being completely distinct from them. Participation is more intimate than that.

¹ Philo says: “[Although the powers you seek are] inapprehensible in their essence they show a sort of impress and copy of their activity: like your seals, which when wax or similar material is brought into contact with them stamp on them innumerable impressions without suffering loss in any part, but remaining as they were” (Philo 1981: 88).

Furthermore, the Neoplatonist can say something about the formal properties of participation. It is asymmetric. Blueness does not participate in its instances, and God does not participate in human beings. Perhaps it is also transitive. A picture of a bed participates in a material bed, which participates in the form of a bed, which means that the picture of a bed participates in the form of a bed. Something that participates in the relevant part of human beings, would also participate in God. Whether or not participation is reflexive is of course famously controversial, given the so-called “Third Man Argument”. Is blueness blue? Does God participate in Himself? These are interesting questions, but we need not pursue them.

Although we have not defined participations: (1) we can say what it is not; (2) we can also specify some formal properties of the relation (it is asymmetrical and transitive, while reflexiveness is controversial); and (3) we can say that the relation is like the relation between universals and their instances. Thus, I think a Neoplatonist can, with caution, appeal to the idea of participation in characterizing the relation between God and human beings in such a way that it casts light on their normative relation: in particular, it illuminates the relevance and importance of God’s existence to human beings.

V. NEOPLATONIST FREE WILL

Let us put some flesh on these rather abstract Neoplatonic bones. Consider free will as an example of an aspect of human beings that participates in God. The theist says—or should say, according to the Neoplatonist—that both God and human beings have *perfect* free will, in the sense of having complete freedom of action, to will the right or wrong thing. It is true that God *executes* His free will better than human beings, who often intentionally do the wrong thing or have weak wills, and thus fail to do the right thing. But a human being’s capacity for free will is no less perfect than that of God. Human free will is part of our ‘divine nature’, which is explained by God.

On such a view, what happens when we act? On one Neoplatonist view, when we act freely, it is *also* an act of God. We take joint credit for it. God acts through us. It is not just a question of *similarity* with God. Of course, there is a danger on this view, that our acts turn out to be partly God’s acts, which might deprive *us* of free will. But perhaps it is not unacceptable to say that our acts are partly His acts. The idea might be that human acts are partly God’s acts, at least when we do the right thing with our free will. In acting freely, we participate in God’s free will, and in doing the right thing, in particular, God acts freely through our free will.

Other Neoplatonists might worry that such a view overly reduces human responsibility and deprives us of freedom. Perhaps it is true that on a Neo-Aristotelian view, we are freer because God does not even have partial responsibility for our actions, beyond setting up us up with capacity to exercise free will. The drawback for the Neo-Aristotelianism is that the capacity that we are endowed with is not perfect, because only God is perfect, whereas on the Neoplatonist view, our capacity for free will is perfect, even if our responsibility appears to be diluted by God’s involvement in our actions. A Neo-Aristotelian cannot say that we have a perfect capacity for free will. It not just the execution of free will in doing the right thing that falls short, but our capacity for free will itself falls short of God’s capacity for free will. The Neoplatonist denies this.²

VI. JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN NEOPLATONISM

In some ways, traditional Judaism fits Neoplatonism better than most versions of Christianity. For Judaism typically has a more optimistic view of human nature than Christianity. According to Christianity, human beings were created with a major flaw from Original Sin—a flaw that can only be cured by the sacrificial death of Jesus. And without that sacrifice human nature would have remained flawed (Four

² Neoplatonists cope with these issues in different ways; see Coope 2020, chapter 6.

Gospels 1952: ??). By contrast, the Jewish more optimistic idea is that human beings are all actually perfect in some central respects, which fits Neoplatonism better than any kind of Neo-Aristotelianism.

Both Judaism and Islam worry about our physical embodiment as a source of sin. But embodiment can be seen as an enticement that human beings have the perfect means to resist. (One is reminded of Descartes on the sources of error, in Descartes 1985, *Mediations*, chapter 4.) Perfection is still envisaged in certain human psychological faculties.

There is an irony here. For the Jewish Neoplatonist, Christian incarnation does not go far enough. It is not that one super special person is the incarnation of God. No. *Every* human being is an incarnation of God. However, the incarnation is not bodily. That would be idolatry (Maimonides 1958, *passim*). It is the *mind* of God and the *mind* of human beings that stand in the incarnation relation (or the relevant parts of their minds). Only Neoplatonism seems to be able to make sense of this. On this view, the human mind, or rather a privileged part of it, participates in or shares in the mind of God.³ *Everyone is Jesus!*

VII. NEO-ARISTOTELIANISM VS. NEOPLATONISM

A major advantage of Neoplatonism, then, is that it closes the gap between God and human beings. It looks like a good way to avoid God's irrelevance problem. Such irrelevance is the fate of Neo-Aristotelianism. Even if a Divine Command Theory is right, on a Neo-Aristotelian view, God is not of immediate concern to us, and is of interest only for pursuing the appropriate means to our ends or to satisfy antiquarian curiosity. But if Neoplatonism right, and God is built into the human frame, because human beings participate in or share in God, it means that God and human beings are not metaphysically distinct because a part of human beings participates in God. (See Plotinus 1991, IV.8.8., 2–3; see also Zalman 1996). The Neoplatonist says that this is why taking God seriously is taking oneself seriously; and taking ourselves seriously means taking God seriously.

For Neoplatonism, human beings are not merely in some respects type identical with God — something that Neo-Aristotelians endorse — but there is some real presence of God in the human mind, which is something that Neo-Aristotelians do not accept. Only this can address God's irrelevance problem. For this reason, one could perhaps go as far as to say that Neo-Aristotelianism has been a thousand-year distraction for the three main monotheist faiths.

Of course, the idea of participation or sharing remains a difficult and obscure idea. I do not pretend to have clarified it, only to say what it is not, what it is like and what some of its formal properties are. Yet sense must be made of it if we are to make sense of anything, since we need it to make sense of universals, and of the sky being blue. If we can understand that then we can understand the relation between God and human beings, such that God is not irrelevant to human beings.⁴

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³ Michael Wyschogrod's view is that God is bodily incarnate in the Jewish people (Wyschogrod 1983). By contrast, the Jewish Neoplatonism envisaged here holds, firstly, that the incarnation of God is universal in all human beings, and secondly that incarnation is psychological not corporeal.

⁴ Many thanks for discussion with Rabbi Yochanan Rivkin, and for advice from Ursula Coope, Oliver Leaman and Kevin Toh.

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