

The Sense of Creation

Experience and the God Beyond

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Introduction

The belief that the world was created by God is fundamental to the major monotheistic religions. It is primarily a religious belief rather than a philosophical conclusion. Nevertheless, it has been widely maintained over many centuries that this religious belief is capable of rational confirmation or justification.

However, this is a claim which is not so widespread today in view of the pervasive presumption that atheism, or at least a robust agnosticism, is the philosophical position most in harmony with contemporary cultural sensitivity. Even convinced religious believers are inclined to accept this view and seek, as we shall see, to insulate their “faith” from the deception of philosophical arguments. This can expose them to another dilemma, namely, a “double-truth” dilemma according to which what is true from the perspective of religious faith is false from the perspective of philosophical reason—a view mirrored by Heidegger’s insistence upon the irreconcilable difference between theology and philosophy and the impossibility of a “Christian philosophy.”¹

A number of years ago, in a book entitled *Atheism and Alienation*, I explored the philosophical roots of contemporary atheism.² I argued that contemporary atheism has effected a remarkable inversion of the traditional relationship between the concepts of atheism and alienation. This involved a noteworthy reversal of the pre-modern conviction that the atheist was the prototype of the alienated or estranged individual—“the fool says in his heart there is no God”—to the current conviction that the theist is the individual who is philosophically alienated or estranged from the context of contemporary culture.

I argued that this reversal has evolved from the philosophical consequences which were drawn on the one hand from the modern scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and on the other from Descartes momentous exploration of the *cogito*. These consequences included on the one hand the presumption that all true knowledge was limited to what could be established by means of empirical science, and on the other hand the presumption that the ultimate foundation of all meaning and value was located within the resources of human subjectivity.

Notwithstanding these widespread (sometimes mutually reinforcing and sometimes mutually opposing) presumptions of contemporary atheism I propose to revisit the claim that “God created the world” is capable of rational confirmation or justification. This will involve both clarifying what it means to say that “God created the world” and adducing reasons in support of the truth of this assertion. The account proposed in each of these stages is somewhat controversial.

1 Cf. M. Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. R. Manheim, New York, 1961, p. 6.

2 Cf. P. Masterson, *Atheism and Alienation: The Philosophical Sources of Contemporary Atheism*, Harmondsworth, 1973.

The first stage, concerned with meaning, follows insights derived from Anselm and Thomas Aquinas about the related ideas of divine perfection and creation. It advances a viewpoint which is incompatible with what is often intended or implied in some contemporary accounts of the relationship between these ideas. In particular, it is incompatible with the view which describes God and his creation as realizing a process of mutual fulfillment as, for example, in certain versions of process theology, or the view that it is more appropriate to speak of God in terms of “possibility” rather than in terms of actuality.

The second stage, which seeks to provide rational argument in favor of the claim that God created the world, is at odds with the views of both unbelievers and many believers that such a project is a futile and indeed a misconceived undertaking. In Chapter 4 I consider the views of those believers who maintain that any attempt to “prove” his existence involves a misconception of the grammar of an affirmation of God.

From these remarks it will be evident that, in its basic orientation, this work attributes enduring significance and value to the, currently unpopular, form of metaphysical enquiry characteristic of traditional natural theology. As such it may be portrayed as discredited and superseded by more contemporary and relevant forms of enquiry in philosophy of religion such as phenomenology and Wittgensteinian linguistic philosophy.

However, it is a fundamental thesis of the book that the relationship between these more recent approaches and the more metaphysical line of enquiry which it advocates is not one of opposition but rather of complementarity. It is argued that these more recent initiatives in philosophy of religion require as a counterpart a dimension of metaphysical qualification if the precious insights they disclose are not to crystallize into oversights.

If there is something original, or at least newly formulated in my line of argument, it is in presenting particular features of experience as suggestive illustrations of the sort of relationship which creation involves and of which, in turn, the idea of creation makes best sense. These features of experience I call, adapting a term of Karl Jaspers, “ciphers of transcendence.” They are “ciphers” in the sense that they are experiential clues that enable us to attain a rational or philosophical affirmation of God. But they are ciphers which, as such, cannot directly disclose his existence. They have to be “deciphered” by philosophical argument which argues that his existence can be affirmed as a theoretical truth condition of these features of experience.

The basic proposal is that relationships such as those involved in human cognition, in ethical response, in our experience of different degrees of being or perfection, manifest a thought-provoking asymmetry. It is an asymmetry which in a way resembles what is envisaged by the notion of creation. It is argued that these relationships are illuminated and rendered more comprehensible by the affirmation of a divine creator which is achieved through an indirect argument from these “ciphers of transcendence.” It is as though the experienced relationships, or ciphers, provide an experiential foothold or basis for the idea of creation which, in turn, provides them with an intelligible basis or foundation. This, as we shall see, involves a conception of philosophy according to which our pre-philosophical lived experience provides the basis or foundation of our philosophical reflection which,

in turn, provides the intelligible foundation or ground of this lived experience—a circular process, perhaps, but not viciously.

The argument for the existence of God developed in Chapter 7, based on the analogical character of the finite beings of our experience, is somewhat different in kind to those developed in Chapters 5 and 6. Whereas they relate to familiar features of our intellectual and moral life, its context and perspective are more distinctively and exclusively metaphysical. It is, in effect, an extended interpretation of Aquinas's fourth argument for the existence of God. Some readers may find it somewhat "abstract" and remote and may prefer to defer consideration of it until they have read the rest of the book which, hopefully, will indicate its relevance.

In a philosophical discussion about God there is, besides the questions of *meaning* and *existence* mentioned above, a third general question which must be addressed. This is the question of how to understand the *co-existence* of God and humans. Some issues concerning this co-existence of God and humans, which arise from our arguments in Chapters 5–7 for the existence of a divine creator, are discussed in the final two chapters. Chapter 8 considers some general issues on this topic and Chapter 9 addresses a conception of this *co-existence* which is very much at variance with the account defended in this book.

However, before we consider these arguments and issues, we must address the first theme of our undertaking, namely, the meaning of the related ideas of divine perfection and creation.

Describing God

Most people who affirm the existence of God do so primarily in the context of a pre-philosophical religious faith. Their affirmation is part of the discourse of the way of life into which they have been born, or “born again” through religious conversion. The language in which God is described or addressed at this level of religious faith is typically rich in self-involving metaphor derived usually from a sacred text and religious tradition proclaiming an eventful salvific interaction between man and God.

Precisely as metaphorical we understand that this language is not to be taken literally. It needs to be tempered by some appreciation or comprehension of how God is to be more appropriately envisaged if idolatry is to be avoided. In religious discourse and worship God may be un-problematically addressed as a “rock of ages” or invoked as a “kindly light” provided we do not expect to unearth him or find him literally in a beautiful sunrise. Our language of presence must be tempered by that of absence and transcendence which distinguishes God from the world of experience and the things which compose it. What is needed is a way of describing God which applies properly and only to God.

Sacred texts such as the Bible do indeed address this issue from a religious perspective. For example, when Moses asks how he is to name God to the Israelites he gets the response *ehyeh asher ehyeh*—usually (but not un-controversially) translated as “I am who am.” The text suggests that God is to be understood as existing in a unique way, utterly unlike any particular determinate being. The history of monotheistic theologies, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, is one of seeking to articulate and elaborate what this might mean.

An important contribution to this project of understanding what we should mean when we talk of God was made by the eleventh-century theologian St Anselm of Canterbury. He provided a description of God which described him, properly and uniquely, in terms which both believers and unbelievers could accept as appropriate. Thus, although himself a theologian working within the context of religious faith, Anselm contributed significantly to the creation of philosophy of religion where rational debate about God could obtain irrespective of religious faith or its absence. That Anselm proceeded to argue from this conception of God to his actual existence and thereby provide an argument which has fascinated philosophers right up to the present day is of secondary relevance to our present discussion. This famous argument will be considered later in Chapter 3. What is of immediate interest is his uniquely identifying description of God—which is an issue of meaning or significance rather than a proof of existence.

Let us consider the description of God provided by Anselm. This consideration will lead us on to a discussion of the related idea of creation elaborated more comprehensively two centuries later by Thomas Aquinas.

In his book *Prosologion* Anselm develops a description of God as “something than which a greater cannot be conceived.”¹ He argues that if we wish to describe God in a rationally convincing way, which adequately distinguishes him from an idol, we must envisage him as that than which nothing greater or better is conceivable. (Anselm uses the terms “greater” and “better” equivalently—“I do not mean physically great, as a physical object is great, but that which, the greater it is, is the better or more worthy.”²)

This orientates our thought to understanding that God is not to be identified with any one or number of finite things which happen to exist, however great or perfect. For in such cases an even greater perfection is always conceivable. God, as envisaged by Anselm, cannot pertain to the order of finite beings. It is only by having such a false or inadequate notion of God, “either giving it no meaning at all or some alien meaning,” that the fool is able to say in his heart there is no God.³

Underlying Anselm’s idea of God as that than which nothing greater or better is conceivable is the intuition of an intimate bond between reality and goodness disclosed through our experience of degrees of goodness, i.e. that some things instantiate a better, more desirable or comprehensive, way of being than others. This experience of reality as manifesting a hierarchy of existential perfection enables us to form an idea of God as its greatest conceivable expression. This idea of divine perfection has thus a foundation in our experience of degrees of perfection. Wherefore, in reply to the objection that we cannot frame any reliable idea of God he writes:

Everything that is less good, in so far as it is good, is like the greater good. It is therefore evident to any rational mind that by ascending from the lesser good to the greater we can form a considerable notion of a being than which a greater is inconceivable.⁴

This intensive bond between reality and goodness, developed by Anselm from Platonic sources, has remained a powerful inspiration in philosophical thought about God, although it is perhaps not so obvious to a contemporary secular outlook.⁵

For Anselm, God described thus as a being than which no greater can be conceived must be understood to be of unlimited perfection and such that “it is impossible to think of it as not existing.”⁶ In other words, God thus described must be understood

1 Anselm, *Prosologion*, ch. 2. Unless otherwise mentioned the translation used is that by A. McGill in *The Many-Faced Argument: Recent Studies on the Ontological Argument for the Existence of God*, ed. J. Hick and A. McGill, London, 1968. Cf. also, *St Anselm’s Prosologion*, trans. with introduction and commentary by M. Charlesworth, Notre Dame, 1979.

2 Anselm, *Monologium*, ch. 2, in *Saint Anselm—Basic Writings*, trans. S. Deane, La Salle, 1962.

3 Cf. Anselm, *Prosologion*, ch. 4.

4 *Ibid.*, Reply VIII.

5 An illuminating discussion of this theme is provided by Iris Murdoch in her discussion of the Ontological Argument. Cf. I. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, London, 1992, ch. 13.

6 Anselm, *Prosologion*, ch. 3.

as existing necessarily and not just contingently as a matter of fact. Anselm argues that to think otherwise would involve a contradiction.

Something such that we cannot conceive of it as not existing ... is greater than something which we can conceive of as not existing. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be conceived could be conceived not to be, we would have an impossible contradiction: That than which a greater cannot be conceived would not be that than which a greater cannot be conceived. Therefore, something than which a greater cannot be conceived so truly is that it is impossible even to conceive of it as not existing.⁷

Hence, the divine perfection, thus conceived, must be envisaged as transcending both limiting determination and merely contingent existence—in other words, as necessarily existing infinite perfection, *verissime et maxime esse*.⁸

This assertion that God, understood as that than which nothing greater can be conceived, must be understood as necessarily existing infinite perfection enables Anselm to affirm that God must exist in reality and not just as an object of our understanding. This is the famous Ontological Argument according to which God's necessary existence must obtain in reality since such existence is greater than merely thought about necessary existence and is therefore required to fulfill the condition of that than which nothing greater can be conceived. This argument has had and still has its famous champions. Its validity has also been widely challenged, correctly in my opinion as I will indicate in Chapter 3.

However, as has been, mentioned, what interests us at this stage of our discussion is an issue of meaning rather than of existence. In other words, we want to focus on the development of what is meant by the description of God as a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. We have seen that for Anselm this description of God involves understanding him to be necessarily existing unlimited perfection—the highest good requiring nothing else, *nullo alio indigens*.

This understanding of divine perfection involved in the description of God as that than which nothing greater can be conceived implies a further important consideration which has a significant bearing on our understanding of the closely related concept of creation. It is the consideration that God plus the world, or God plus any creature, cannot be conceived as “greater” or “better” than God alone. If the created world constituted an additional perfection to that realized in God he would not be that than which nothing greater can be conceived. For God plus the world would be conceivable as a greater perfection than God alone.⁹

Anselm's description implies a conception of how the relationship between other beings and God is to be understood. It involves the idea that even if the world and its components did not exist, or ceased to exist, there would be no diminution of goodness or perfection—“things can in no way exist without You, though You do not

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Cf. R. Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, Notre Dame, 1982, p. 9. The implications of this understanding are further developed by the author in *Christian Faith and Human Understanding*, Washington, DC, 2006.

exist any the less even if they return to nothingness.”¹⁰ God is not “better” because of the world nor is there “more” perfection than God’s because of creation. The infinite perfection of God and the finite perfection of the world are incommensurable. The latter should be thought of as participating in (dependently, and in a limited way, and without adding to), the infinite perfection of God.

This conception of the relationship between the world and God has its philosophical foundation in the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of creation. Anselm’s account provides a perspective from which it can be developed philosophically. This development, as we shall see, was carried through very effectively a couple of centuries later by Thomas Aquinas in his account of creation. It involves a very different view of the relationship between the world and God (or gods) from that developed in Greek and Roman religions and philosophy (and indeed from some contemporary views of the relationship).

The gods of Greek and Roman religions, although revered as the best and most independent beings, were certainly part of the world and never thought of as possibly existing in the absence of the world. They were expressions of the necessities which human beings encounter in the world, which they must respect and which control their destiny.

Even when the religious-poetic conception of the gods as implicated in human fate was philosophically purified in the Greek enlightenment by philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle the divine realities remained part, albeit the most perfect part, of the world.:

No matter how Aristotle’s god is to be described, as the prime mover or the self-thinking thought, he is part of the world and it is obviously necessary that there be other things besides him, whether he is aware of it or not.¹¹

Indeed it was natural to take the given world as the ultimate context and to seek to understand it as a unified structure of lesser or dependent and greater or more perfect constituents. Such, for example, is the distinction, within a unified context, between Aristotle’s “divine” First Mover and lesser mutable beings, or similarly, Plato’s distinction between the One and the many. As Robert Sokolowski observes:

Both the philosophical and religious thinkers of antiquity took the whole of things, the cosmos, as the ultimate setting for their thought. They did not conceive of the possible nonexistence of the cosmos; its factual givenness was quite properly taken for granted, and the divine principles, the god or the gods, were thought of as the highest and best entities within that setting.¹²

The modern term “cosmetic” provides a suggestive indication of the Greek conception of the “cosmos” as a hierarchically unified totality rendered “beautiful” in virtue of the harmonious interrelationships of its parts. This finite totality was what was taken to exist necessarily and such explanatory distinctions as might be

10 Anselm, *Prosologion*, ch. 20 (trans. Charlesworth).

11 Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, pp. 15–16.

12 Sokolowski, *Christian Faith and Human Understanding*, pp. 13–14.

discovered were to be sought within it. The divine being or god was seen as the highest internal principle of this finite totality, not as its transcendent source. In the Greek conception there was an equivalence between the notions of “being,” “finitude,” and “perfection.” The idea of an infinitely perfect being would have seemed a contradiction in terms.

The Judaeo-Christian idea of God and creation proposes a very different conception of things. The finite world of our experience and all its constituents is understood to be the totally dependent outcome of a free decision of an infinitely perfect God to originate it into existence. This primarily religious understanding is given philosophical focus in Anselm’s description of God as that than which nothing greater or more perfect can be conceived. This description implies that the world must be understood in relation to God’s transcendent perfection in such a manner that this divine perfection is neither enhanced nor relativized by that of the world. For otherwise God would not be that than which nothing greater could be conceived.

The conception of creation implicit in this description by Anselm of God as that than which nothing greater or more perfect can be conceived embodies a significant philosophical insight which is explicated and developed by Thomas Aquinas, in way which we will consider further in the next chapter.