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Grounding the Concept of God in the Human Predicament

Abstract:

Contemporary religious epistemology often neglects offering a substantial defense of a particular conception of God, relying instead on appeals to tradition and the great theologians. I aim to correct this deficiency by offering a defensible concept of God grounded in the predicament faced by all human inquirers. My account of this human predicament will focus on three key features that are salient to religious inquiry: death, moral failure, and suffering and severity. I will then argue that we ought to define our concept of God in terms of what it would take to rescue humanity from its predicament, thus allowing our conception of God to capture what matters most to us.

1 – A Call for a Defensible Concept of God

Most contemporary religious epistemology begins with a brief stipulation of the author's preferred conception of God. The motivation for doing this is sensible; the concept of God one selects will have a significant impact on the kind of evidence one would expect such a God to offer. For example, I could build into my concept of God, among other things, that God is a physical being residing on a distant extragalactic planet. If this God exists, then at least one route to acquiring evidence of God's existence would be to physically travel to this planet and gather sensory evidence of such a being. In this case, the barrier of access to evidence is merely physical and technological; this God would prize physical exertion and scientific achievement as worthy traits to acquire evidence of God's existence. Alternatively, someone may insist that God is a nonphysical being, and thus, gathering the evidence for such an entity's existence would likely look much different and require other characteristics from those searching for evidence of that God. The point is that one's concept of God largely affects one's religious epistemology, and thus, we should think carefully about which concept of God we select.

Unfortunately, many of the concepts of God on offer, specifically in book length treatises are given no defense, no reasons to suggest that we ought to conceive of God in the way they have described. More often than not, a classical theistic or Anselmian perfect being conception of God is assumed at the outset of most philosophy of religion projects.¹ It is deemed sufficient for the reader to embrace the concept to note that, for hundreds of years, the great theologians and thinkers of Western culture have conceived of God in this way. Yet, when it comes to adopting a concept of God that will guide most further philosophical reflection, I do not think I am alone in wanting something more substantial than merely what past theologians thought.

¹ For two of many examples, see Rowe, W., (2007), p. 6 and Peterson, M., (2009), p. 9.

What religious epistemologists and philosophers of religion ought to be after is a conception of God that is not primarily rooted in any Scriptural text, but instead is grounded in something more universal – something that most, if not all, religious inquirers can embrace. My aim in this paper is to do just this by offering a defensible concept of God grounded in the existential predicament of human inquirers.

In what follows, I will offer three key features of the human predicament that I take to be salient for religious inquiry. By “human predicament,” I mean the situation that all human inquirers face *qua* human – features of human existence in which all humans find themselves. The three features of interest are death, moral failure, and suffering and severity. After explaining each of these features, I will suggest a concept of God built upon the existential plight of inquirers trapped in the human predicament.

2 – Features of the Human Predicament

2.1 - Death

A key feature of the human predicament is the inevitability of human physical death. Even with proper nourishment, exercise, and a lifetime of healthy practices, the human body deteriorates and eventually dies. This does not just happen to you and me, but to all human beings. Death is no respecter of persons. I specify death here as “physical,” because it is logically possible that human beings are or have immaterial souls. Such souls may be the locus of personal identity and could, in theory, allow continuous personal existence after physical death.² In this way, we can contrast *physical death*, or the failure of one’s organic materials to

² Of course, there might be other logically possible ways that personal existence could continue after physical death. I do not mean to endorse any particular story concerning substance dualism or reincarnation.

sustain life, with *personal death*, which is the end of an individual person's existence. The unsettling question that confronts us is whether personal death occurs simultaneously with physical death. The earnest inquirer might wonder "Can I survive my physical death?"³ Thus, the human predicament includes facing our inevitable physical death with the uncertainty of whether or not we will continue to exist after that moment.

If it is the case that personal death coincides with physical death, then to call our situation a "predicament" is an egregious understatement. Anything and everything that you value, such as personal achievement, family, and states of pleasure will cease to have meaning *for you* at the moment of your personal death – after all, you will no longer be in existence for such things to have meaning for you. Surely, this impending loss of meaning is worthy of some despair and grief. But, it might be argued, "Do not despair!" for although such things no longer have meaning for you, they may have meaning *for others*, that is, for your descendants and society into the distant future. In fact, such a future legacy may provide extra meaning during your life in knowing that you will make a positive, lasting impact in the world. However, even this expanded locus of meaning is a chasing after the wind. From what we can tell with our best science, our universe will inevitably end in a cosmic dissipation.⁴ Eventually, through the accelerating expansion of our universe, any structure, any organism, and indeed, anything on our lists of valuables will become so spread thin that all that remains is an unimaginably vast space of equidistant sub-atomic particles and bundles of energy. If this is truly the end of the story for humanity, our universe, and everything we care about, then our story is indeed a tragedy.

³ I do not mean to raise issues regarding when exactly physical death occurs.

⁴ See Neil DeGrasse Tyson, "Ends of the World," *Natural History Magazine*, June 1, 1996.

Although some might cite an austere beauty that comes with a meaningless universe, there seems to be a reasonable modicum of fear and despair that accompanies such a story.⁵ First, there is fear in facing the unknown. We do not and cannot have acquaintance with the “what-it’s-like” of non-existence to assuage our fear. Bertrand Russell famously argued that it is this proper, “instinctive and biologically useful” fear of death that causes people to believe in an afterlife.⁶ No friend of theism or arguments for an afterlife, Russell firmly validated the idea that death is to be feared.⁷ Second, there is despair because of the impending loss of great value. Everything and everyone that we love and care about will inevitably cease to exist if the above story is correct. The loss of love relationships is extremely painful and, is a genuine loss of value, particularly if the loss has finality. Imagine for a moment the eternal loss of those closest to you, be it your spouse, children, family, or friends. Most would count it vulgar to consider celebrating the raw, austere beauty of a world where physical death marks the end of a person. Grief and despair would be the proper attitude, at least for a time, but appreciation and contentment would be most unwelcome and ill-fitting. The permanent loss of something that is inherently good or valuable, like a genuine love relationship, calls for fear, sadness, grief, and despair.

But is the envisioned alternative any better, a world where persons survive their physical death and continue their personal existence into eternity without ceasing? Bernard Williams has famously argued that an eternal heavenly life could only “produce a sense of tedium...and [would] remove any uniqueness, and therefore the precarious preciousness, of our human

⁵ See Jerry Fodor’s true scientific vision iterated in Paul Moser, *The Evidence for God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined.*, (New York: Cambridge UP, 2010), 46.

⁶ Russell, Bertrand. *Why I am not a Christian*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957), 90.

⁷ I am aware of eastern accounts of death that would directly rebut this notion. See Prasannatma Das, “A Hindu Theory of Life, Death, and Reincarnation,” in *Life & Death*, ed. by Louis Pojman (Jones & Bartlett, 1993).

struggles and choices here and now.”⁸ In other words, so the argument goes, we have traded the despair of death and loss for tedium and unimportance, and further, that the purported life hereafter would be necessarily undesirable. Notice, this argument hangs on the notion that eternal personal existence would necessarily result in *unyielding* boredom and meaninglessness, presumably due to the lack of urgency and opportunity costs that would normally accompany finite lives. The boredom would have to be unyielding according to the argument, because, if it were only the case that boredom occurred *sometimes*, then it becomes much less clear that the heavenly state would be necessarily undesirable. After all, our earthly lives can and often do contain boredom. But this does not then make our lives necessarily undesirable; in fact, it could be argued that the opposite is true – that times of boredom are ripe for reflective thinking about one’s life and others. So, the claim must be not that boredom sometimes occurs in heaven, but rather that eventually all moments in heaven would be hopelessly boring.

Brian Ribeiro, a defender of William’s argument, champions this idea, “There’s no earthly experience, activity, or project that you – remaining more or less as you now are – would enjoy, were you allowed to do it forever.”⁹ However, a counterexample to this claim may be found in the notion of *inexhaustible pleasures* such as the experience of lasting, genuine, loving relationships. I have in mind here the love relationships with our closest friends, children, spouses, and perhaps even God (if God exists), and that these would plausibly be able to sustain an eternity of blessed and joyous experiences. Does requited agape, unconditional love ever get old and boring? It is not so clear to me that it would. Or perhaps heaven is the kind of place

⁸ John Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2014), 139.

⁹ Brian Ribeiro, “The Problem of Heaven,” *Ratio. An International Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 24.1 (2011): 51.

where new people come into existence; perhaps people could have offspring in heaven. This seems like another source of inexhaustible joy – to be able to impart love and compassion to endless generations of one’s offspring and new community members. Would such a life really amount to unyielding boredom? Again, it’s not clear that it would.¹⁰ Ribeiro fires back that there is, “no reason to affirm, *and every reason to deny*, the existence of any *inexhaustible* earthly pleasures,”¹¹ but sadly, he does not offer any reason or argument for this claim. Perhaps the discussion ends in a battle of intuition over whether some state would become boring or not, and the debate cannot be decisively settled. Still, I contend that my examples of possible inexhaustible joys and pleasures are plausible, and thus, that notion of eternal existence, particularly in a blissful-type afterlife, is not *necessarily* undesirable. And thus, if there are these possible inexhaustible pleasures, it is *good* to hope for them and to seek an alternative to the threat of personal death upon our physical death.

To be sure, I am not saying that the above discussion offers reasons to think there is, in fact, a God or an afterlife; I am saying that the above considerations about death teach us this lesson: human beings are in need of being *rescued*. We need a rescuer to save us from, what our perspective indicates, the irretrievable loss of value upon personal death. Inquirers should want to know if there is a way to escape this fate. We ought to wonder if there is, in fact, hope. Is there a way to avoid the dreadful demise of my own person, those I care about, and valuables on a societal and cosmic scale? Maybe. Such concerns ought to have a role in how we conceive of God.

¹⁰ Ribeiro invites us to imagine doing our favorite thing for 100 years, then 10,000 years, and then 100,000 years. Even then, one has barely begun to scratch the surface of the length of everlasting existence. Does the staggering length of time really not make one feel like one’s favored experience would become painfully dull? It is difficult to assess this kind of reasoning since the experience of heaven, if it is a safe haven from the woes that plague the human predicament, would be much unlike our current lives.

¹¹ Ribeiro, “The Problem of Heaven,” 53.

2.2 – Moral Failure

In addition to exhibiting physical frailty, human beings consistently fail to be morally good. By nearly every robust normative ethical system one can think of, theistic and secular alike, human beings are wide off the mark of moral perfection. Every day on this planet, heinous acts are committed by people toward people. Things like rape, at least some forms of torture, and brutal murder are among these daily horrors. Perhaps not as unsettling but still quite wicked are the intentions and thought life of people the world over; bitterness, loathing, callousness, and pride run rampant among most if not all human beings to at least some degree. Sadly, it also does not seem like humans are getting any better. To be sure, humanity has made progress on social issues, in particular those dealing with discrimination and inequality. But, in other ways, modern humanity is guilty of just as much hatred, oppression, and alienation as our predecessors, if not more. Though the particular problems our modern world faces may be different from the issues that haunted earlier centuries, the root problem of human selfishness persists. This world is rife with moral failure.

Therefore, it is fair to say that humanity has a recalcitrant moral problem. Though some individual human beings may rise above the fray and approximate some measure of goodness, all have failed to some degree. This is not logically necessary; of course, it is possible that there would exist some human being that would be morally perfect from birth until death. Yet, we have no evidence that any human being has done this, at least none that is not itself dependent on the success of our religious inquiry.¹² Thus, just as before, an inquirer should wonder if there is a way to be rescued from this problem. Couldn't one object that human beings do not need to be rescued by an outside source; instead, could people not apply a great amount of determination

¹² I am thinking here of the claim that Jesus of Nazareth lived a morally perfect life. Such a narrative would not be admissible as evidence at this stage in our religious inquiry.

and willpower to their moral shortcomings in order to overcome them? This is a nice idea. The idea that humans could pull themselves up by their moral bootstraps and at some point in time renounce all moral deficits and continue on in moral blamelessness is initially plausible and inspiring. However, our available evidence indicates that humans have been unsuccessful in attempts to solve this problem on their own. We have no evidence of people ever being able to completely eradicate moral failure from every aspect of their life. Even with the best upbringing and determination moral failure eventually rears its ugly head. Thus, I contend that we ought to find out if there is some sort of *outside* help that can be given to humanity to overcome this systemic moral problem. It is in our interest to find out if there is a rescuer that could empower human beings to achieve lasting moral blamelessness. But without this help, humans are stuck in the predicament of rampant and crippling moral failure.

2.3 Suffering and Severity

The third important feature of the human predicament salient to the religious epistemology is the widespread suffering and severity that occurs in our world. By suffering, I mean any physical, emotional, and psychological pain and loss that results from either the immoral acts of others or various unplanned, unintended maladies cause by nature and humans. Severity, following Paul Moser, is a specific kind of suffering that consists of “a kind of stress or rigor that is free of evil but is nonetheless rigorously difficult for humans.”¹³ All human lives, at least up to this point, have some amount of suffering and severity in them. Some individuals may experience more severity and suffering than others, but even the most well-off people experience some degree of suffering and severity. For example, all human beings have a

¹³ Paul K. Moser, *The Severity of God: Religion and Philosophy Reconceived* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), 2.

biological mother and father that contributed to their conception. Severity could come in many forms when it comes to the parent-child relationship. Of course, never knowing one's parents or having a strained relationship with them brings its own set of difficult and stressful issues. Yet, some may have wonderful parental upbringings yet experience severity when met with the impending loss of those parents at death. Suffering also clearly abounds in our world. For instance, the physical, financial, and emotional toll incurred by countless lives after natural disasters is enough to showcase the widespread amount of suffering. And just as the moral problem shows no concrete signs of stopping, *ipso facto* the problem of human suffering seems like it will persist as well. Most, if not all, immoral acts cause some amount of human suffering, and thus, as long as the moral problem remains with us, we can expect the problem of suffering to remain as well. In the face of these evils, human inquiries should want answers to these questions: Is there any meaning or purpose for this suffering and severity? Why does it happen and why is there so much of it? And is there hope that the future will be better and have less of this bad stuff in it?

All three features, death, moral failure, and suffering and severity, form the core of what is means to be in the human predicament. And it is a predicament. Without a rescuer, the future looks bleak indeed. We stand to lose everything we have ever cared about at our physical death, if it is also our personal death, while also trudging through a difficult, insufferable, and morally tainted existence. This is the proper starting point for religious epistemology. This is the context in which we begin our inquiry, whether we recognize it or not. I will argue in the next section that recognizing this context ought to guide and illuminate our search for a rescuer.

3 – The Concept of God

The above discussion brings to light a core desire and yearning among those stuck in the human predicament – is there a rescuer who is mighty to save? An affirmative answer to this question is the only satisfaction for our existential plea for lasting meaning and hope. And so, my suggestion is a simple one; let “God” refer to a being that is able and willing to be humanity’s rescuer. Nothing else matters as much as the search for such a being. Why not then label that which fulfills what is most important “God?” This conception of God gets at what humans truly desire to know.

Other traditional conceptions of God, such as those frontloaded with majestic properties such as omnipotence, omniscience, foreknowledge, and omnipresence, contain unnecessary stumbling blocks to the search for evidence of God’s existence. Many inquirers get bogged down trying to sort out the complexities and possible incoherencies of some of the traditional attributes of God, meanwhile, such properties are peripheral to what matters most. What matters most is finding out if there is a rescuer from our predicament. If some traditional alleged property of God turns out to be incoherent or problematic in some way, and it is beyond the bounds of what is required of a genuine rescuer, then so much the worse of holding onto that property.

So, if our concept of God is an entity worthy of being humanity’s rescuer, what sort of characteristics are required of such a rescuer? There are three main criteria that a potential rescuer must meet, and we can use these criteria to help unpack what attributes we can justifiably suppose such a rescuer to have. The rescuer must:

- A) Succeed where humans failed.
- B) Have the ability to move humanity from a place of failure to success.
- C) Have the willingness to exercise the ability in B.

To satisfy (A), the rescuer could not undergo personal death, would be morally perfect, and would bring meaning to suffering and severity. If our potential rescuer failed in any of these respects, it would need to be rescued as well! Criterion (C) is satisfied by the rescuer's moral perfection. Being rescued from our predicament is a good thing, and if at least part of what it means to be morally perfect is that the agent aims to bring about the good of others, then the morally perfect rescuer would be quite willing to rescue. The difficult criterion to assess is (B), and a full answer would require, in particular, a close examination of the notion of moral perfection. Suffice it for now to say that satisfying (B) would require that the rescuer be quite powerful and knowledgeable concerning how to move humans out of their predicament.

Interestingly, it turns out that this concept of God is not completely foreign to a traditional conception of God. The rescuer would have to be everlasting, morally perfect, and extremely powerful and knowledgeable to be able to satisfy the above criteria. The key difference is that the conception I am offering has a strong foundation. It is built upon the rock of our existential perspective. Our deepest yearnings in the human predicament cry out for a hopeful answer, and this concept of God as rescuer answers the call – a fruitful starting place for religious inquiry indeed.

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