

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF GOD ?*

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Can we use our minds to think seriously about God? Can we humans attempt to understand what God is like? Our first normal reaction to such questions would be to say NO. God is beyond our human minds and it would be foolish that we humans could think about Him in an adequate way. We should admit that the divine mystery transcends us.

But our human minds do not accept such a simple answer. They naturally reach out to understand everything that exists, whatever that thing might be. The understanding that our minds attain may be very inadequate at times but that inadequacy does not inhibit our normal human tendency to continue to search for fuller understanding. This holds true in all areas of human knowledge, including our knowledge of God. The minds that we have been given by God constantly seek to understand God better.

One path that has traditionally been followed in seeking to understand God has been the path of **similarity**. (In the Middle Ages this was technically called analogy.) This path seeks to develop our understanding of God by affirming **what He is like**. Religion makes use of such similarities (metaphors) when it speaks of God as a Creator of a Father or as Light.

Of course, when we speak of God metaphorically, in terms of something found in our human world, we do not affirm that He is precisely the same as these human realities. As divine He transcends them even though He is like them. Christianity, for instance, does not affirm that God is a father in precisely the same way that a human being would be a father. His fatherhood transcends human fatherhood.

A second path that this search for understanding God takes is that of **negativity**. We clarify our understanding of God by affirming **what He is not**. We move toward understanding God by affirming that He is not physical like a stone, that He is not mortal, that He is not evil. Such negative affirmations certainly do not give us adequate or comprehensive understanding of God but they do help to clarify what God is like. We are always using a variation of this path of negativity as we modify the statements we make in our path of similarity. Thus we will say that God is *not* a father in precisely the same way that a human being is a father.

*This paper will be included in Fr. Michael D. Moga's forthcoming book on the Philosophy of God.

This chapter will be an attempt to see how far we can go in thinking about God. Basically we will try to think about Him by using the path of similarity. We will consider three metaphors that describe God (Creator, Self and Ground). We will also utilize the path of negativity by pointing out how our ideas do not precisely suit God. God infinitely transcends what we think or say about Him.

God as Creator

One traditional way of thinking about God begins with a sense of the natural world, the world of stars, earth, sea, trees, birds, and human beings. It seeks to understand God in terms of this world, conceiving Him as the perfect and ultimate cause of all these natural things. (This is a way of thinking about God which was first proposed by the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, and then developed further in the Middle Ages by Thomas Aquinas.)

Frequently this path of thought emphasizes the idea of causality. It starts from the experience of various causes in the natural world, things which are responsible for other things. A kernel of corn, for instance, causes a corn stalk, male and female cats cause kittens, a human being produces a house. When God is thought of in terms of this idea of causality He is conceived as a Creator.

At this point there is need to clarify the distinctive way that God is a cause of natural things. God as cause is conceived to be a **distinct** being, separate from all other beings. The causes that we discover in the natural world are always outside their effects, the objects that are caused. No being causes itself. Builders of house, for instance, are always separate from the houses they build. This way of thinking leads us to conceive God as a separate being who exists outside other beings and who exercise His causality upon them from that external place.

God is the **first or primary cause**. While causing other things He is not caused Himself. All the other causes in nature are themselves caused by prior causes. They are secondary causes. The kernel of corn which produces the corn stalk was itself produced by a prior corn stalk.

Our thinking demands that there must be a cause which is ultimately responsible for all the other causes, something which explains how everything else came to be, something which is the reason why there is something rather than nothing. Such is our idea of a creator, a first cause. This path of thought conceives God to be such a first cause.

God of nature must be a **perfect being**. When we reflect on the qualities possessed by a first cause we discover that this being must possess

the fullness of all qualities or perfections. It must lack nothing. Two of the reasons why this first cause must be perfect are these: 1) The first cause is the ultimate cause of all other beings. In order to give existence to all these other beings this first cause must itself possess the qualities of these beings. It cannot give something which it does not have. Thus the God of nature, precisely as first cause, must possess the perfection of all the beings that have ever existed and all the beings that will ever exist. 2) As first cause the God of nature is incapable of being caused. (If some other being were able to cause the first cause then that first cause would become secondary cause.) This means no other being can make an effect on this first cause, no other being can change this first cause. For a being to be incapable of being given anything it must by its nature possess all perfection in an infinitely complete way. It is only because of this fullness of its perfection that it cannot be given something new. Thus, the first cause must necessarily be perfect precisely because it is the first cause.

The God of the natural world must be **unchanging**. This God cannot grow or develop. The reason for this quality is obvious. This God possesses all perfection to an infinite degree. As a result there is no new perfection that it can acquire and there is no perfection that it can lose. All the other objects in the world of nature change precisely because they are not perfect. They acquire something which they did not have before or they lose something which they previously possessed. But such change is impossible for an absolutely perfect first cause.

The God of the natural world must be **eternal**. It lives within one eternal present moment, all of its perfection contained in that "now". It is above all time and history, having no beginning, no end and no temporal process. This God must never have had a beginning since it is uncaused and it must not be engaged in a temporal process and such an end represent a lack of perfection. In this regard it is completely different from all the other objects of the natural world which have beginnings and ends, which change through temporal processes, which move from a past through a present into a future.

This God of nature must be **unrelated**. It must not be involved in a relationship with any created being. The reasons for this unrelatedness of God are obvious. 1) If God would enter into a relationship with a created being (for instance, the planet earth) then He would undergo a change and He would be caught up in history. There would be a before and an after in God (before the creation of the earth and after the creation of the earth) and God would be no longer eternal. 2) A relationship (for instance, God's love for a human being) would give something new to God. Something would be added to the divine life. The divine life would be influenced or caused in such a case. As a result, God (in this respect) would no longer be the first cause.

This quality of unrelatedness may strike us as strange because of our religious backgrounds. Christians and Moslems think of their God as related to the human world. For them, God in some way is the "Savior" of the world, God "loves" human beings. For this reason believers in the past have had difficulties with this path of thought and various theologians have struggled to come up with explanations which try to preserve both the perfection of God and His relatedness to the world.

The God of nature is **one**. There can only be one being which is the first cause of nature. One path of reasoning which reveals this oneness of God begins with the perfection of God. There cannot be two beings which both possess the fullness of perfection. If two gods were to exist (god A and god B) then there must be something which makes them different from each other. If that difference consisted in something which god A possessed and which god B did not possess, then god B would simply not be god because he is not perfect. If, on the other hand, that difference consisted in a lack in god A then god A would simply not be god because he is not perfect. There can only be one all-perfect being.

This first approach to the understanding of God utilizes the path of similarity. God is conceived to be "similar" to a cause in our natural world. Similar to the way that a kernel of corn produces a corn stalk, two cats caused kittens and man produces a house, so God also causes things in the natural world. He is responsible for their existence. We usually do not think of "causing" as a metaphor but we should realize that there are many different ways that causality is found in the natural world. The kernel of corn does not cause the corn stalk in the same way that a man causes a building. The sense of "cause" is somewhat different in each of these cases. God's causality of the world is similar to these other causalities but it remains quite different.

That is why there is need here also for the path of negativity. God does **not** cause things in precisely the same way that other natural causes operate. To be a first cause, an eternal cause and a perfect cause, is quite different from being an ordinary natural cause. We have pointed out above some aspects of this "difference". As a cause God is not caught up in a temporal process. As a cause God is not related to or dependent on what He causes.

God as Self

A second way of thinking about God begins not from the natural world but from the world of human selfhood. Each of us has a sense of his life as the life of a self, something very different from a natural thing. It is very natural for us to take this idea of self and to think of God in terms of it as a special type of person or self. It is noteworthy that human religions in the

past have generally presented God such a form. Judaism speaks about God as Yahweh, Christianity talks of God as Father, Islam speaks of Allah, some Hindus worship God as Vishnu. In each of these cases God is presented as a divine self.

There is need at this point to clarify this metaphor or model of "self". Precisely what does it mean to be a self? What are the basic characteristics of a self?

1) A self is **involved**. To be a self means to be involved in the world, caught up in concerns and relationships. A self does not exist by itself as an isolated being. A self necessarily is related, becoming a self through its various involvements. Students are concerned about school and their friends, parents are concerned about their work and their family, citizens are concerned about their community and country. It is in these involvements that these selves achieve their selfhood. By contrast, a stone that sits on the seashore is completely locked up in itself. It is not connected or related to any other stone on that shore. It is entirely contained within its outer surfaces.

These relationships of a self are not merely theoretical, where a person thinks about another person or thing. Relating involves an active participating in the world and in the lives of other people, involving activity of various forms.

The relationships of a self are essential to its existence giving it its basic meaning. As its relationship change, a self changes. This change shows itself very dramatically at that moment when a person enters into a new career or becomes married. At such a moment the meaning of the life of the self changes radically.

Conversely, these relationships of a self give meaning to all the things and persons in the world of the self. Those persons whom I love have a meaning which is distinctly different from the meaning of those whom I hate. Those things which I treasure have a different meaning from those things which I ignore.

2) A self is **historical**. To be a self means to have a past, a present and a future. A self is projected out into these temporal dimensions and lives them all. It lives from **out of** a past where there were involvements, relationships and experiences. Based on that past it makes decisions in the present, growing and developing as it creates itself through interaction with others. It reaches out toward the future in various ways: in commitment, in relationships, in concerns. A self lives in all the dimensions of history and is never enclosed within the narrow, static confines of a present moment.

Using the path of similarity let us now apply this metaphor of self to God, trying to think Him precisely as a self. First of all, as a self God is **involved**. God is intimately related to the world that He has made and to each of the persons and things He has created. The meaning of God's existence is dependent upon these things in His world. God is the God of the acacia tree, the mosquito and the dolphin. In turn, the truth or meaning of all created things is derived from this relationship. Acacia trees, mosquitos and dolphins are beloved creatures of God.

God's relating to the world means that He cares about each human being and each thing in the world. He was sorrowed by the death of the dinosaurs, He takes delight in creating a rainbow in the sky, He looks forward to the blossoming of roses. He calls each human being to respond to Him and to enter into a personal relationship with Him. His existence is "incarnated" into His world.

The Judaeo-Christian tradition in its sacred books presents such a picture of a relating God. Yahweh was intimately involved with the affairs of His chosen people. Jesus presents us with a vision of a God who enters into human life in a total way.

Secondly, as a self God is **historical**. He has a past of involvements and relationships with His creation. He reaches out toward a future filled with surprises. In the present He is in the process of creating himself, changing and developing through his interaction with His creation. He is a dynamic reality as He discovers and lives new ways of being divine. His life is never routine; he is ever new.

There is need at this point to apply the path of negativity, "correcting" our sense of God as self, our sense of God as related and historical. For our usual sense of self is taken from our experience of human selfhood and one characteristic of the involvements of any human self is their limitedness. As a human self I may be caught up in various human relationships and in various concerns but I am not involved in everything. There are many things that I am not involved in. Furthermore, the involvements that I have are always limited. I am not able to give myself in a totally complete way to any one of them.

The way that God is involved must be quite different from this. First of all, God is involved with every created reality, both present and past. His environment is not limited but includes everything embraced by his infinite care. (He cares about every flower in the fields and every bird in the sky and counts every hair on our heads.)

Secondly, God's relatedness to the world and to people is far more intimate than any human relationship. As a human self I am closely identified with my home, my family and my work. They are truly part of my

life. God identifies Himself even more closely to people and things. In a direct and immediate relation he participates fully and completely in the world of His creatures. His intimacy with the world must be similar to our human intimacy with our bodies. God is pre-eminently the incarnate One and the world and people are His body.

Thirdly, God's relatedness to the world and to people is unconditional, it is dependent on nothing. In his involvements He cares totally and eternally, no matter what. His care for the world is not contingent upon the response that is given Him. A sense of this is found in the biblical authors who were amazed at the limitless faithfulness of God. Jesus affirms this unconditional relatedness of God in his parable of the prodigal son.

In these examples we have made an attempt to show that God precisely as self must be supremely relative. He is related to His created beings in a way that infinitely surpasses our human relating.

We need also to utilize the path of negativity to refine our ideas about the historicity of God. Our human historicity is always limited. Our pasts include only a few personal experience and a few traditions of our family and culture. Furthermore, our awareness of these "pasts" is quite limited; there is so much that we are not in tune with. In a similar way our human futures are quite limited: a few plans, a few dreams. Finally there is a significant limitedness to our human presents. Our capability of freely recreating our lives is quite limited.

By contrast, the historicity of God must be infinitely richer than this. God is "super-historical", involved in an infinite way in the dimensions of time. As a self He is in tune with every historical event in the billions of years of the past of creation. Each of these past events is alive in Him. Similarly, He is sensitive to infinite possibilities in the future. God is "super-dreamer". He anticipates each of these possibilities and reaches out to it. Finally, in His present God brings together His experiences of the totality of past events together with the infinite possibilities of the future and He gives himself to a profound process of self-creation. Creatively, God constantly becomes new in a total way. Nothing limits His creative becoming.

The change and creativity that we find in the created universe suggests a creator who is the embodiment of change and creativity. God can say "I will make all things new" precisely because He Himself is constantly new.

God as Ground

A third path that is used in the understanding of God starts from the realm of human subjectivity and understands God as the basis or ground

of the meaning, value, and possibilities that are found there. Let us reflect briefly on some of the ways that a sense of God is present in human subjective awareness.

Meaning. As I live my life I am aware that my actions are meaningful. To learn, to work, to play, to have friends, to worship God, to create beautiful things: all these actions are meaningful. As I go about my daily routine this sense of meaning is always there in the background.

Meaning is very important. It is the basic food of human existence filling our lives, giving us a reason to get up in the morning, inspiring us and leading us to be active. The sense that it is worthwhile to be alive produces a quiet joy that pervades our lives. Without such meaning we would be tempted to despair and to commit suicide.

Human meaning can be terribly profound. At times we experience that there is a deep reason for being alive, for loving, for learning, for creating, for working. Enthusiastically we throw ourselves into these activities for we know that they are terribly important. What is this that makes life so meaningful?

In deep moments we sense profound meaning arising out of our futures. We sense a permanent significance in our decisions and our efforts to move forward, imperfect as those efforts might be. Our efforts to improve human life and to increase the joy of the world are not wasted even though we encounter frustration and failure. We live in the firm hope that we are building something which will be forever significant.

What is the basis of this hope? Why do we have the certitude that our struggles are meaningful? This basis for hope cannot be anything in the objective world since everything in such a world is marked with failure and death. There must be something with subjectivity that buoys up our spirits with joy and hope, giving us the power to laugh at death. That "something" which is the ground of our eternal hope must be God.

I realize that the source of human meaning is not myself. I can neither create nor control the meaningfulness of my life. At times, anxiety strikes me when I realize that the meaning which sustains my life could suddenly be taken from me and I will be left with an empty life. This anxiety alternates with a deep sense of gratitude for the rich meaningfulness of the life that I have. What is this mysterious basis of human meaning that I depend on so desperately? That which makes human life profoundly livable must be God. It is God who ultimately is the basis of human meaning, making human life rich. God thus plays an essential role in human life, saving man from the darkness and narrowness of a meaningless life by providing reasons for human activity.

This path of understanding God is quite distinctive for it does not lead us to an objective concept of God such as infinite substance or divine self. To sense God as ground is not to sense something present in front of my mind but to be aware of something behind my thinking. He is the basis of that meaning which embraces my thinking.

Value. One significant aspect of our objective experience is the presence of "values", those things which are important to us. We value family, education, beauty, success and friendship. These important things light up our lives and give us motivation. We respond to these important things by being active and enthusiastic. Without them life would be boring.

Sometimes we encountered profound values, things which are so important that we are willing to sacrifice our lives and to die for them. We value human life and we struggle to keep human beings alive. We care about truth and justice and we sacrifice ourselves in a fight to realize them. We value love and we give our lives for its sake.

Values confront us and demand a response. We encounter the sacred and we are guided to reverence it. Beauty appears and we acknowledge its presence by treasuring it. The demand of a sense of loyalty leads us to stand by a friend. We recognize the value of our own unique lives and we make efforts to develop those lives. In our response to values we are led to go beyond ourselves and our own individual feelings.

Values are very necessary for our lives for without them we would be condemned to an animal-like existence of seeking pleasure and satisfying basic needs. Values give us excitement and something to live for. Their variety keeps us perpetually wide-awake and leads us into growth. Our lives only become truly human when we have discovered a value that is worth the sacrifice of our lives. How deeply grateful we are for the values of our lives and for that which is the basis of all values: God.

Values are similar to meaning in that their source is quite hidden. We recognize that we do not create them by ourselves. We experience them to be objective as they rise up in our lives and confront us. What is this mysterious source of value that gives richness and excitement to our lives? Shall we call it God?

Possibilities. One of the wonders of human experience is the presence of limitless possibilities. Anything can happen, life is always open. Because of this openness we humans can dream of strange new things happening. No matter how wild our dreams are we know that we have not begun to exhaust the possibilities of life.

The life of a plant or an animal is fixed and final. After a few years a dog has exhausted the possibilities of canine existence. There is nothing new for it to learn or to do. Human life never reaches such a plateau. There are always new things to learn, new people to meet, new experiences to explore, new challenges to meet, new dreams to create. How wonderful this is! How blessed human life is! Not even death shuts off the openness of human life. We can dream beyond death.

What is it that makes human life so infinitely open, full of limitless possibilities? What is responsible for this openness of human experience? We can conceive God to be the basis of this openness. Here again, as in meaning and value, God is found within human subjective experience, being responsible for the profound richness of that subjectivity.

In these three examples (meaning, value, openness) God is conceived to be present within subjectivity precisely as "ground". He is not an object in front of me (a Creator or a Person), which I can think about or relate to. He is behind me like a light which gives illumination to the entire situation. He is responsible for the most profound elements of human experience: eternal meaning, absolute value and unlimited possibility. God makes our human lives worth living.

Faith and God

We have presented three very basic and different ways of thinking about God: God as infinite Creator, God as Self, and God as Ground. It is noteworthy that these models have a great influence on the character of our religious faith. The form of our faith in God is dependent on the model of God that is present in the faith experience.

For instance, when we understand God as a separate Being who is a perfect and infinite Creator our faith becomes: 1) a basic affirmation that infinite Creator exists and 2) a submission of our lives to the wishes of that infinite Creator.

When we understand God as Self our faith becomes an entering into a personal relationship with this "self" God. This sensitivity would involve: 1) a continual openness and sensitivity to the divine Self, a dialogue that changes through time, 3) a responding to this divine Self in every activity of one's life.

When we understand God as Ground faith becomes a basic trust in the meaning, value and possibilities of human life. This would necessarily involve a giving of ourselves to some aspect of life, a committing of ourselves. We are believers to the extent that we are caught up in ultimate concern. In

this concern we leave our egos behind with all their fears and self-centeredness and we respond to meaning and values beyond ourselves. We give of ourselves.

The passive character of human faith becomes very apparent in this form of faith. God is active here not only in revealing the meaning, values and possibilities of human subjectivity but also in catching us up in concerns for things beyond ourselves.

Conclusion

We have presented three different ways of thinking about God and three different forms of religious faith. Such a presentation invites us, first of all, to analyze in a critical way each of these concepts of God and, secondly, to give ourselves to that form of religious faith which we find most valid.