God and the human experience

A physicist’s case for a theistic world view

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Introduction

Always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you the reason for your hope.
(Peter, 3:15)

There are many books out there arguing that God does, or does not, exist. This book does not attempt to be another one of them. Rather, God is defined at the beginning in a sufficiently abstract way, as the ultimate reality behind the bare fact of existence, and the rest of the book explores how to think about and—possibly—relate to that reality, by considering the various aspects of our (human beings’) experience of existence. For convenience (but also with an ulterior theological purpose in mind) this experience is divided into three “worlds”: the outside world of other (nonhuman) beings of matter and energy; the internal world of our consciousness, ideas and values; and the world of other human beings, centers of consciousness like our own, with whom a relationship as equals is possible. It is argued that in each of these “worlds” we encounter a different aspect of God, and that the whole of our experience of this ultimate reality can be integrated into a world view that can be fairly characterized as “minimal” or “basic” theism.

The range of specific topics explored is necessarily quite broad: from the interplay of “chance” and determinism in the material universe (what is called here “the creative freedom” of the world); through the human mind’s ability to reflect upon its own thoughts, and hence to conceive of, and seek, truth; to the main problem that humans encounter as moral, reflective beings, namely, the “problem of evil”: the reality of undeserved suffering. The overall approach is, I believe, thoroughly empirical, and as free from speculation as possible. Die-hard atheists may naturally take issue with some of my language, but not, I expect, with my methodology. As regards the physical sciences, I have not assumed anything beyond the current, well-established theoretical knowledge; as regards biology, and particularly evolution, nothing beyond modern Darwinism. The relative autonomy from bottom-up processes that I have claimed for the human mind in Chapter 3 is nothing but the minimum necessary for the word “freethinker” to be meaningful; or, alternatively, for the pursuit of science to be at all possible. I have even acknowledged, at the end of Chapter 4, that the best possible objective response to the “problem of evil” is likely to be felt as subjectively unsatisfactory, which makes the subjective response presented in Chapter 5 all the more necessary. In turn, the latter may be said to depend solely on whether some of the claims of various forms of religious experience (most importantly, in the context of suffering, Buddhism) are, at a minimum, psychologically true; but this can be regarded as an empirical question to which an affirmative answer seems warranted by centuries of successful practice.

I certainly do not expect that the book will be liked by everybody; in fact, it may well end up being disliked by everybody. In a worst-case scenario, Buddhists may feel that I have distorted their teachings to support Christianity, whereas Christians will fail to recognize their faith in my bare-bones presentation of it; and members of other religions may well be upset that the insights provided by their respective faiths are not properly taken into account. Theists in general may
feel that I have conceded too much to “naturalism” at the outset; and, of course, atheists will take issue with my overall interpretation of the facts, if not with the facts themselves. But it has not been my intention, at any point in the writing, to try to tell anybody “I am right and you are wrong!,” or to start an argument. I have merely tried to present my world view in a way that makes sense to me, in hopes that it may help somebody else in some way. Speaking as someone who once wanted to be a mathematician, I think it is important to show that there is at least one way to think about all these deepest questions of existence—about God, and Life, the Universe and Everything—that is reasonable, consistent with the facts, and compatible with the message of hope, and the call to ethical living, of the great religions of the world.

Also—and to continue with the mathematician’s analogy—my goal here has been, in a sense, to establish the strongest possible result, based on the “weakest” set of assumptions (about “how God works,” for instance). More assumptions will “buy” you a stronger result, of course; but I contend that the framework presented here is already sufficient as a basis on which to build a “minimally theistic” world view—and a meaningful life.

Ultimately, however, as I said above, I do not pretend to be “better” or “more right” than anybody else. I merely hope to be helpful, and, if possible, to build bridges, rather than exacerbate differences. For the rest, I have a strong suspicion that (fortunately for all of us!) the spiritual life is a little like quantum mechanics: it does not matter much how you interpret the theory, as long as you follow the rules correctly…

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1 Well, no, actually, the people who say that we are “just apes” are wrong (see Chapter 3). And so are those who say that there is no free will, or that we are not capable of independent thought, or of ascertaining the truth and basing our actions on it. Only, it does not matter whether I say that they are wrong or not, since they are already, by their own statements, declaring themselves incapable of rational discourse…