

Divine Activity as the Most Important Presupposition Underlying the Problems of Philosophy of Religion

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Philosophers of religion attempt to analyze the philosophical problems clustering around the basic religious statements and, by accounting the validity of these statements, render them true or false. The analysis of religious statements, however, is always grounded on presuppositions in which the problems originate. Despite the fact that problems of philosophy of religion are so various, most of them suffer from flawed or inadequate account of this or that presupposition. Instead of answering the main question, therefore, one must clarify the way one conceives of presuppositions in order to be justified in judging the statements. This paper aims to show that the way one conceives of divine activity² in the world is of decisive importance in the formulation of any question in philosophy of religion, and that the majority of conflicts in philosophy of religion has arisen from the misconstruction of divine activity although such misconstruction is hidden in the procedure of argumentation and does not surface.

It is necessary to take into account the following points to have a good picture of what is intended here. Since the philosophy of religion is problem-oriented, the constellation of debates formed around this philosophy includes those problems and themes that have been in a way significant for the individual philosophers (both believers and nonbelievers). The origin of questions and the way they are posed are hence very important.

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² . It is noteworthy that the word "activity" as it is meant here must be taken literally. We mean by it the immediate way that God acts in the world. Other words such as "agency" are avoided, for they imply a sense of mediation which must be refuted in any adequate conception of divine way of relating to the world.

A) Some questions are rooted in the common-sense attitude about religious matters and this primary kind of conception brings with it some difficulties. Superficial conceptions of religious matters, especially when it comes to God, have occasioned problems and questions which in turn have determined the course of philosophical discussions.

B) In some cases, “the defense of theism at any cost” through simplistic arguments leads to other flawed, invalid consequences that usually remain unnoticed at first glance. It is therefore necessary, in the first place, to put forth conceptually valid accounts of the problems. In argumentations used by philosophers of religion, it is usually the case that they concentrate mainly on providing a sound argument to prove or refute a given statement while the conceptual accounts of main elements involved in the religious claim are missing. Accordingly, if philosophers of religion emphasize such conceptual accounts, their arguments would go in a different way.

If one studies the problems of philosophy of religion, it would be discovered that “the divine activity in the world” plays a decisive role in questions posed and answers given although it does not manifest in the core arguments. The majority of problems in philosophy of religion, therefore, must in the first place give an adequate account of divine activity and take it as the basis on which the value judgement of a given statement would rest. Some of the problems of philosophy of religion are examined in what follows to provide some support for our claim and to show how the divine activity plays significant role in formulation of both questions and answers under study.

1- In deistic analyses of 17th and 18th centuries, one notices a kind of talk about God’s role in the world as if He determines and explains the course of events wherever science fails to do that. If granted, it follows that the ordinary course of events, determined and explained by the constant, necessary laws of nature, is not in need of attribution to a free, purposeful agent such as God. It was this inadequate view of the way God exerts its activity in and through the world that nourished the atheistic movements of that age. One might argue that this very view was a kind of partial

atheism paving the way for a more overarching one. This view led, as its result, to the conception of “God of the gaps”, namely the One who inevitably would lose bit by bit His realm of activity and presence as the science progresses in explaining the gaps of universe. The poor God shrank to a degree that Auguste Comte maintained that it was useless and superfluous to propound the problem of God in the mature age of science, for there was not any other work for Him to do, for there was not any other phenomenon or event in need of explanation in terms of His activity. The famous statement of Laplace that he had explained everything in his book and “had no need to the hypothesis” - i.e. the hypothesis of God - is another manifestation of the inadequate view.

The teleological arguments of natural theology, esp. the design argument which is of meaningful significance for their being grounded on scientific findings, are structured this way: we infer a rational designer of the perceived order of nature and this grand designer cannot be itself a part of nature. The question however is immediately asked as to how this designer manages to design the nature. Does this designer utilize a given, predetermined and constant laws of nature to order a set of things, just like human beings do? Is the analogy between the works of nature and the works of artifacts strong enough to explain the creation of cosmic order by God? Philosophical examinations have had the goal, throughout the history of the design argument, to articulate or study the arguments for and against the existence of God.

All argumentations offered by William Paley (1743 - 1805) and David Hume (1711 - 1776) were supposed to articulate or evaluate the design argument, whereas we find hardly any single philosopher who has managed to decode the way the divine activity works in the world. This is so, while the divine activity is the presupposition of design argument and if it had been accounted for adequately, the line of thought in the history of design argument might have changed dramatically.

2- In the history of the design argument, Paley offered famously the analogy between a watch and the world on the ground that both need a designer because they fulfill particular purposes. His argument, known as the argument of the “means ordered to ends”, gave rise to a conception of God as “the divine watchmaker” according to which God is needed only at the early stage of making the world and organizing its parts but thereafter the world works on its own and does not need anything without itself. It is true that in this account there is no talk of the God of the gaps, but this watch analogy brings with it some implications that seem to be wrong.

First, just as a watchmaker has before his eyes the laws of mechanics – e.g. the laws dominating the workings of springs and gears – and then begins to make the watch and organize its parts, the divine action must be accomplished according to a set of pre-established laws which are known as essential to nature. It follows that the role of God be reduced to making use of a set of laws independent of Him.

Second, watchmaker does not play any role in continuation of its existence and its working right after the watch is made. The role of watchmaker is therefore to organize the parts and create order; the rest of the story lies at the hands of natural laws. On this account, the activity of God is reduced to Platonic demiurge that has done its work at the beginning of the world and now there is no work for it to do. This handcuffed God is not only deprived of having any role in the actual, present existence of things but also He could not play any role in their actual, present organization.

Third, since the natural laws were supposed to be essential to it, the laws themselves as existing independently of God and as God’s opponent in natural changes and transformations were kind of restriction to the divine activity. If there had been an adequate conception of the divine activity, the watchmaker analogy could not produce such flawed consequences.

3- The argument from design has been defended by some philosophers who used probability calculus and argued in a way as if God has ordered the world all of a sudden or in a short period of time. In other words, the fact that some existing orders in the world are created accidentally – in the form of its analogies such as that of a kid typing some characters accidentally and, all of a sudden, creating Webster Dictionary – has nourished the inadequate view that God has created the world all of a sudden or in a given period of time just like human intelligent designers (e.g. the writers of Webster) create orders out of their contrivance (*tadbir*). The thesis of the sudden creation of the Earth or Adam has evidently contributed to this view. On this view, the gradual contrivance of the world accomplished in a period of some billion years has not been agreeable to religious people of this sort. This is the reason why Darwin's theory of evolution has been considered to be the enemy of religion. Now if the divine activity or even His being designer is not considered within the restricted period of early ordering as articulated in this view, believers may have responded differently.

4- Whereas any trivial change in the world is motivated and determined by the continuous divine activity (within the system of natural laws of course), the way people conceive of the special divine mercies appearing through miracles or through the granting of invocations has been grounded on the assumption that the divine activity is not continuous, but confined within the aforementioned limits and one cannot expect something beyond them. It is a plain fact that the continuous divine activity has been largely ignored by believers. Therefore, being ignorant of the general divine mercies in one's life (in contrast to the special divine mercies, i.e. miracles) or when encountered with refusal of invocations, people tend to become skeptical in respect to God's existence or His attributes.

Some believers try, in such cases, to protect their faith by convincing themselves with the help of fragile justifications but deep in the soul they always feel resentful that their invocations and wishes are not fulfilled and this feeling eats away at their faith or at least obstructs the flow of deep

faith in their entire life. As it is clear now, it is the inadequate consideration of the presupposition of divine activity that constitutes the core of such questions, while the formulation of most answers aims to provide argument in order to justify faith in the mentioned cases and not to provide an adequate account of the divine activity.

- 5- The problem of evil which forms a considerable part of the philosophy of religion is grounded to a large extent on how one presupposes the divine activity. The conception of God, esp. in Christianity, as heavenly Father who has nothing for His earthly children but mercy and grace, when natural and humane calamities and disasters are taken into account, would lead to a contradiction that not only makes the belief in God dubious but also paves the way to radically deny His existence. It is therefore necessary to give an adequate account of how God acts in the world according to His attributes such as mercy, power and wisdom in order to accommodate the evils in the whole picture of the world in a consistent way.

Undoubtedly, if it is the case that the mighty attributes of God work conjointly with the beauty attributes of Him, one is not allowed to reduce the divine mercy only to the state of a kind and companionate father who acts exclusively out of his kindness and compassion. One must instead have a much wider conception of divine mercy that can encompass for example the subduing attribute of Him which is used against those people who exercise oppression and iniquity on others. In such cases, the presence of evils in the world is misrepresented if one describes the act of God as cruelty or ruthlessness. Although all the answers based on this wider conception of God may not be adequate or sound, but it sufficiently demonstrates that the kind of discussion adopted in formulating different conceptions of the divine act can occasion various trends of argumentation in philosophy of religion. It shows in turn that it is of decisive importance to account the presupposition of divine activity in the problem of evil.

It is known that in providing answer to many problems of philosophy of religion, process theology takes into consideration the issue of divine activity and manages through a distinguished conception of it to overcome

many difficulties in this domain. On this account, the word creation is displaced by creativity and also the divine act is reduced to persuasion – rather than coercion – which is employed to all beings that are conceived of as agents of free will. As a result, God in this theological paradigm plays a persuasive role and not that of creation and activity. Process theologians had rightly realized that the main difficulty with the problem of evil lies not so much in arguments for or against it as in the fact that how the divine activity is presupposed. Although their solution still suffers from many respects, their attempt demonstrates the decisive role of the divine activity presupposition.

- 6- The drawback of meaninglessness that Ayer and Antony Flew maintain the religious statements suffer from and hence render them as failing to the test of verification or falsifiability criterion is all grounded on their inadequate conception of the divine activity. If one conceives of the divine activity in the world as the activity of a gardener toward his garden (as it is illustrated in the Parable of the Indivisible Gardener) who only facilitates a natural procedure, it is obvious that existence and non-existence of God does not matter significantly. If one accounts the whole procedure of growth of plants, on the contrary, in terms of a constant discipline (i.e. natural laws) prescribed by God and continuously willing this discipline to be effective and valid, the whole picture we have changes dramatically, let alone the very existence of gardener and garden which is emanated at any and every moment by Him. It seems unfortunately that the responses of Hare, Mitchell and Hick to this problem are offered in a context that is in agreement with the wrong assumption of Flew. Many examples, analogies and parables used in theological discussions are misleading and producing even more difficulties by themselves. It is therefore necessary to investigate any account that we have of the divine activity before launching to the study of meaningfulness or meaninglessness of religious statements. If so, the wrong conceptions of religious matters might be corrected and there remains perhaps no room for some of the controversies in philosophy of religion. In this regard, Ian Crombie was well aware of such problem and

tried to correct some of these misconceptions by counterfactual hypotheticals.

7- In cosmological arguments, esp. the five proofs of Aquinas, the way the divine activity is conceived – as the relation of father to son or that of carpenter to chair or that of architect to building – would give rise to the same problems that theologians confronted with. This misconception is unfortunately so widespread and ubiquitous that affects almost all cosmological arguments and makes them extremely vulnerable. Any cosmological argument that defines the divine activity as the relation of father to son cannot survive the infinite regress problem. Moreover, this type of causation suffers from more difficulties than can be trusted and employed in accounts of the whole world.

If we conceive of the divine activity as the relation that exists between us and our mental images, many of the aforementioned problems would not appear and the way for cosmological argument would be better paved, for there is no example in the world similar to the divine creation which bestows existence. This shows that the cosmological argument is basically influenced by the way one conceives of the divine activity.

8-There is another analogy used mainly by practitioners of Sufism, according to which the way of God's action in and through world is understood as the relation of the Sun to its light. It is true that this analogy demonstrates the total dependence of world on God, but it leaves no room for accounting the divine will. That is, God and His activity are interpreted in a deterministically structured whole. It follows that the divine action is due to His essential nature and He is represented as if He is forced to do what He does.

9-In moral argument and in the account of God's relation to moral laws, the conception of moral laws as entities of ontological status requiring somebody or something that bestows existence to them is again misleading with regard to how God acts in the world. It seems at first glance that argument from morality considers the divine activity in its fullest totality, but it represents the divine activity in a way that inevitably entails some difficulties when attributing the good to God and describing His activity as morally valid. One can argue on the contrary that moral laws are of no ontological status and hence are in no need for being subject to divine activity.

Extremism seen in formulation of account of divine activity gives rise to an important problem known as "the relation of religion to morality", one of which is the question of how to understand the attribution of some properties to God. As a result, the problem of divine activity must be addressed before discussing the relation of religion to morality, because the former makes the ground for the latter.

10-In discussion of the truth and diversity of religions, pluralists claim that God manifests in different religions in different ways. One can argue that this claim shifts the focus of attention away from the active presence of God in the world to the passive pluralism of believers. In this view, some spiritual aspects of God, with no bearing on His activity, are drawn to the center of attention which leads in turn to a subjectivist conception of God. As a result, any consideration of natural events and changes which must be grounded on God's wisdom and mercy gives way to other ones. It is evident that as adequate conception of divine activity will constrain pluralistic ways of thinking about the One.

11-The majority of innovative models in theology, such as postmodern theology or process theology, are developed to satisfy humanistic expectations from God in order to amend some of the implications of inappropriate religious beliefs that contrast with humanism. Such theologies manage to induce a

conception of divine activity that is in agreement with individual's expectations. One can argue that provision of adequate conception of divine activity will also undermine humanistic theologies and in deed makes the need for any alternative religious models basically dubious.

The above considerations, seen collectively, reveal the fact that, instead of analyzing the arguments of philosophy of religion to judge their validity, it is from the outset necessary to lay emphasis on the provision of an adequate picture of divine activity as the most fundamental presupposition of all problems discussed in philosophy of religion. Having this adequate picture at hand, one must try to reformulate all questions involved anew in order that the problems of philosophy of religion be propounded and assessed in the new context.

Properties of Successful Accounts of the Divine Activity

On the other hand, the fundamental questions of philosophy of religion and answers given to them so far make us believe that there is one condition for successful account and that is, it should take into consideration all different aspects of divine activity. The aspects involved in the conception of divine activity, one can argue, can be as follows:

1. It must adequately illustrate the existential dependence of world and human being to God without reducing Him as a part of the world of creation (this feature is called the negation of total unity of existence);
2. It must explain God not as something in the beginning of, or beyond, the world but as something in the continuity of any and every moment of the world and in its mechanisms and events and changes whatsoever;
3. It must give an account of the divine wisdom and contrivance in organizing all parts of the world while leaving intact the fact of evil;

4. It must explain the divine will in all mechanisms of the world while leaving intact the human freedom in his own deeds;
5. It must be able to accommodate the divine knowledge to any and every bit of the world while leaving intact the simplicity of His essence;
6. It must attribute the changes and events of the world to God in a way that does not undermine the constancy of His essence;
7. It must be able to argue for the special mercy of God in particular situations in a way that does not undermine the correct conception of His general mercy for all the world;
8. It must avoid attributing non-existential issues such as moral laws or aesthetics to God;
9. And finally, it must be able to integrate the possibility of a continuous communication of human being with Him.

The above considerations are those that the “theories of divine activity”, developed in the history of Islamic philosophy and theology, have sought to take into account as best as possible. That is why any school of thought emerging in Islamic tradition has attempted to give an account of the divine activity that can better fit to, and satisfy, the above conditions than other schools.