

GOD INTERROGATED

Reinterpreting the Divine

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About the author

Philosopher Lynne Renoir was raised in an ultra-conservative Christian home, but despite 50 years of giving everything she had to her faith, she failed to experience anything like the transformation that is promised to believers. A problem she faced was how to explain the transformation that seemed to be occurring in the lives of others, including those who held different beliefs, and those who held none. Her pursuit of this question led her to complete a Master's degree in Psychology, followed by a PhD in Philosophy. At the same time, she developed an interest in quantum theory, and read everything she could find by physicists and cosmologists who write for the general public. Carrying out this research in these disciplines led her to the view that Christianity was not the path for her. What proved life transforming was the realisation of her oneness with the whole of reality.

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Introduction

Among the most important questions that have ever been asked are those concerning the way everything we know came into being, and how this process or event may be related to the purposes of our existence. Three major religious traditions known as monotheisms attribute the whole of reality to a divine, all-powerful creator. The earliest, Judaism, holds that God revealed himself to the Israelites, and that if they obey his laws he will acknowledge them as the people he has chosen to bring his light to the world.¹ Christianity teaches that God came to earth in the form of his son, Jesus of Nazareth. Through faith in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus, it is claimed, our relationship with God, broken due to our sinfulness and rebellion against him, can be restored. Within Islam, the name of the one true God is Allah, and the Quran is his most perfect revelation. Muhammad is the final prophet sent by Allah to teach human beings how to live.

The decision to believe in God may result from a sense that there must be a higher power who is responsible for everything that exists. Alternatively, it may arise from an instinctive feeling that there is something more to life than can be explained by what is immediately apparent. Belief in God may also be based on the awareness of deficiencies in a person's experience. Among the needs that could met in this context would be a sense of having sins forgiven, of receiving divine love, guidance, and protection, and of finding meaning and purpose in life.

Although the existence of God cannot be proved, a person who decides to exercise faith in him would expect to receive an assurance that some kind of transformation has occurred as a result of taking that decision. It is possible however for a person to accept the doctrines of a given faith and to put into practice the behaviours it requires, without at the same time experiencing any deep-seated sense of inner change. If on other hand such an awareness should become a reality, the individual would have reason to regard the experience as a confirmation of the teachings embraced.

One of the factors working against the validation of beliefs by personal experience is that similar kinds of transformation can take place in the lives of adherents within the different traditions. Although there are certain areas of commonality among the teachings of the monotheisms, a comparison of specific doctrines shows that many of them are contradictory, or at least inconsistent, so that what is held to be true in one system of belief would be regarded as false in another. An example would be the Christian doctrine that God became man in the person of Jesus, whereas the idea of an incarnated God is regarded as blasphemous in both Judaism and Islam. From this it follows that if similar kinds of inner change occur in the lives of believers from the different faiths, transformative processes based on truth would appear to exist alongside those based on untruth. Because of the distinction between the experiences themselves and the concepts on which they are based, inner change of itself is insufficient to establish the accuracy of the beliefs held, regardless of the status attributed to them by the individual.

My own interest in this subject arose from fifty years of deep commitment to the Christian faith. Although I had no doubt that Christianity was true, I did not experience anything of the transformation that is described in the scriptures as being normative for the believer. During this period I met people of various religious persuasions who were living examples of the qualities I lacked.

¹ The masculine form of God is normally used in Judaism and Islam, though within Christianity there is a growing tendency to use the feminine. For convenience, the masculine form is used in this book.

In a situation where I commit myself to belief in God, should I find that in the depths of my being I am not affected in any way, I am faced with two choices: one is to believe that my attempt to reach God, or to allow God to reach me, has been in some way defective; the other possibility is to form the view that there is no supreme being at all. In the former case, the reasoning processes that result in my acceptance of God's existence may cause me to continue with this belief. My position would be consistent with teachings in the various scriptures that human beings are affected by sinfulness or disobedience, so that an individual's experience could not be relied upon in making a decision about whether or not God exists. Although it would be possible for me to believe in an all-powerful being based on the evidence presented, in order to remain true to myself as a person who lacks the inner confirmation of belief, I may find it necessary to question the idea of the divine.

Whereas discussions about the existence of God are usually conducted at the level of the rational, the position outlined in this book is that the experiential dimension is of fundamental significance in determining questions of ultimate reality. It will be claimed that while experience can never establish the existence of something that cannot be proved, the presence of an inner transformative process is evidence of a form of truth that transcends the dimensions of right and wrong in reaching to the core of who we are.

The question of whether or not there is a God has historically been of interest to philosophers, and some of their positions are examined in the first section of this book. In contrast to science, which addresses questions of factual accuracy through the formulation and testing of hypotheses, philosophy examines all forms of human knowledge and experience, including the possibility of rational justification for belief in God. Examples of the issues discussed in philosophy that are relevant to questions about God's existence include the nature of reality, and how we are able to know anything at all, that is, whether we rely on our reason, the evidence of our senses, or our inner experience.

Until the modern era, which began in about the 16th century, most thinkers in the monotheistic traditions had some form of belief in an all-powerful being. Then followed a period in Western thought when the interpretation of experiences deemed religious, together with the earlier view that the concept of a supreme being was necessary to explain the origins of everything we know, came under attack from those who claimed that God's existence was not required to account for either the natural world or individuals' personal experience. In other words, they asserted that the idea of a supreme being had become irrelevant. Arguments have been advanced in recent times by theorists such as the philosopher Bertrand Russell and the biologist Richard Dawkins that religious belief is unscientific, misguided, or even dangerous. Associated with this position is the idea that human beings, particularly those living in democratic societies, have been emancipated from the constraints of authoritarian religious dogma.

While rejecting the above dismissals of God's existence, philosophers such as Jean-Luc Marion and Hilary Armstrong have argued that the notion of "God" is beyond human thought and language, and that it is inappropriate for the deity to be defined in the traditional way as a being possessing certain attributes. The approaches proposed by these thinkers, however, retain the view that humans can be in relationship with this ultimate mystery. Today there is an increasing interest in such an understanding of God, and it represents the continuation of a minority viewpoint that has always recognised the inadequacy of human attempts to comprehend the divine.

In most modern societies, truth is equated with the correctness of facts. This principle is applied to religious questions in the same way as it is to our everyday experience of the physical world. For example, the idea that there is one God, Allah, and that Muhammad is his prophet, is considered by Muslims to be a fact just as surely as is the idea that the earth is round. But in recent years, what have previously been regarded as the unassailable truths of our existence on this planet, have been shown to be enveloped in a fundamental ambiguity. For example, it was originally believed that light consisted either of waves or of particles, but quantum theory has revealed that particles also have a wavelike nature, and that all matter exhibits both wave and particle properties. Because they have no definable location, the particles of which everything is made are seen as having an intrinsic connectedness. No ultimate separation can therefore exist between individual beings and objects.

After examining some philosophical theories about God, I will discuss the above findings in science and how they may relate to experiences recounted by mystics. In some of these altered states of consciousness, the awareness of self disappears, and there is no recognition of any identifiable being or object, everything being absorbed into a mysterious oneness. These experiences indicate a reality that seems to transcend the idea of a personal God, or even of a God who is beyond our ability to describe.

Having presented arguments from both philosophy and science that are mostly opposed to the traditional view of God, I will suggest that the question of the deity cannot ultimately be determined by means of reason or evidence, and that the experiential level of our being is the place where personal truth is found. For some individuals this will include a sense of connection with the divine, while for others it may involve the realisation that we are one with the whole of reality.

SECTION 1 GOD AND PHILOSOPHY

Chapter 1

THE ROLE OF REASON

In the history of philosophy, scholars have examined the place of reason in the formulation of religious ideas. This chapter discusses some philosophers from a Christian culture, most of whom place a high value on humans' rational capacities. They analyse the respective roles played by reason and revelation in addressing the question of whether God exists, and the kinds of characteristics he may possess.

Belief in God has historically been concerned with the nature of his relationship both with the world and with human beings. In the 17th and 18th centuries it was thought that since the period of his original creative acts, God has had no continuing involvement in human affairs or in the functioning of the natural world. By contrast, certain modern thinkers known as process philosophers have suggested that God is not a separate, self-contained being, but is interdependent with the universe and evolves along with it. Traditional believers have generally taken the view that God is above and beyond what he has made, and that he desires to enter into a relationship with us, his creatures. To this end, it is claimed, he inspired selected individuals to write and teach about his will and purposes. The lives and testimonies of these chosen ones, together with the doctrines contained in their work, form the basis of the monotheistic belief systems.

Within Christianity, the various acts of divine inspiration involved numerous people over lengthy periods of time, and different perspectives are presented by the writers concerned. It is also the case that whenever the sacred texts are read, the kinds of life experiences people bring with them will give rise to a variety of interpretations in respect of the doctrines outlined. The historical consequence of this state of affairs has been the formation of various groups, each having a particular approach to the teachings as a whole. The question then arises as to the degree of liberty individuals can expect to be given when interpreting specific aspects of the faith. The Roman Catholic Church, which is the largest Christian body, has placed strict limits on what can be accepted in terms of an individual's insight into truth. At the other end of the scale are groups within the Protestant tradition who respect the autonomy of a person's relationship with God, including the exercise of conscience, and the possibility of truth being revealed through the private reading of scripture or through the testimony of others.

Following periods of persecution suffered by believers in the early history of the church, Christianity was given official status in the 4th century by the Roman Emperor, Constantine I, and became the dominant religion of the empire. From then onwards, the church and state were so entwined that with the rise of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, the persecution of non-Catholics was officially sanctioned. Many of the oppressed adopted a retaliatory approach, and later in the post-Reformation wars between Protestant England and Catholic Spain and France, people on both sides were killed purely on the grounds of their religious beliefs. A similar situation exists today in certain Muslim countries, where the death penalty is imposed on those who convert from Islam to another faith. As was the case in Europe, a particular interpretation of God's revelation is regarded as the absolute truth, and no provision is made for people to hold alternative

views. The individual's rational capacities are thereby devalued, with disastrous consequences for the societies involved. Although the use of reason alone cannot establish the existence of God, it is one of the factors that is generally regarded as significant in evaluating the relevant evidence.

This chapter discusses the thought of the Western philosophers, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Leibniz and Hume. These thinkers examine the extent, if any, to which we can rely on reason to support the idea that a divine creator exists and seeks to engage with us at a personal level. Later we will examine theories that give a lesser value to our reasoning capacities, or that elevate the role of experience above that of the intellect.

Seeking the divine

In the Ancient Greek world, myths were used to explain everything in human experience. Gods and goddesses, who were regarded as the personification of impersonal forces, were believed to exert their power over the world and its inhabitants. For example Zeus, the king of the gods, had a protective concern for the socially vulnerable and was angered by evil deeds. Because his will was supreme, he was identified with the force of fate. Then from about the 7th century BC, the Greeks developed a unique way of questioning that sought impartiality in their attempts to understand their society, the world, and the universe. Having recognised that earlier religious ideas were merely products of artistic imagination, these thinkers aimed to replace the world of myth with an approach based on independent human thought. Their form of inquiry became known as philosophy. Among the questions they examined were the nature of reality and the means whereby knowledge is acquired. With regard to the former, it was typically assumed that matter had always existed in some form. While theories were developed to explain why the world exists, alters, and appears to us in the ways we observe, for most thinkers of this period, no all-powerful creator was needed to explain how everything came into being.

Whereas the Greek philosophers had relied on reasoning to arrive at the truth, Christian thinkers of the medieval period taught that God reveals himself primarily in the scriptures and through the teachings of the church. But because of the high regard in which the Greek thinkers were held, attempts were made to reconcile some of their ideas with traditional religious beliefs, and thereby to provide "proofs" of God's existence. In the 11th century, St. Anselm of Canterbury defined God as the greatest possible being we can conceive. If such a being were to exist only in the mind, he claimed, a greater being would be possible – one who exists both in the mind and in reality. From this he concluded that God must exist.¹

One of the most significant contributors to the discussion of reason and revelation was the 13th century theologian and philosopher, Thomas Aquinas. An Ancient Greek thinker, Aristotle, had proposed that since movement occurs in the world, and the planets themselves are constantly moving, there must have been a "Prime Mover" who set everything in motion.² Aristotle also observed that everything in nature has a cause, which suggested the idea of a chain of causes stretching backwards in time. Since this chain could not reach to infinity, a self-sufficient "First Cause" was required to explain the existence of everything that is.³ Aquinas equated this being or cause with the Judeo-Christian God.⁴ A further claim made by Aristotle was that the basic nature of organisms is to fulfil their ultimate purpose or goal. This idea formed the basis of an argument demonstrating the existence of God that became known as the argument from design. It was claimed that the concept of everything in the world acting towards its own beneficial ends indicated the existence of a designer who has the characteristics of knowledge, purpose, understanding, foresight and wisdom. These various approaches to the natural world and their

relationship to the creator were accepted by most Western thinkers up until the scientific revolution which began in the 16th and 17th centuries.

In the teaching of Aquinas, the Greek view of the value of human reasoning can be placed alongside religious belief. He proposed that everyone has a natural ability to formulate rational arguments for God's existence through observing the workings of nature. Then through a supernatural revelation, we are able to understand the qualities traditionally attributed to God, and the facts surrounding his entry into history in the person of Jesus. This knowledge is conveyed to us through the teachings of the church and in the scriptures. Although he gives recognition to the value of human rationality, Aquinas maintains that the exercise of reason alone is never sufficient to enable a person to have knowledge of the things God reveals about himself.

Most of the arguments for God's existence based on the role of reason concern impersonal characteristics and functions such as creativity, cause, and purpose. Even if these could be shown to have merit, there is no obvious way, other than by the acceptance of revelation, to connect the being they describe with the God depicted in the monotheisms as perfect, wise, gracious, loving, merciful, patient, forgiving and just, and as a being with whom we can have a personal relationship.

God's existence and clear ideas

Following the medieval period, there was a rapid increase in the exploration of the world, together with developments in the understanding of humans' place within the cosmos. Examples were the circumnavigation of the globe, and the planetary discoveries made by scientists such as Copernicus and Galileo. The hierarchies of the church became threatened by these events, since they seemed to imply that knowledge could be obtained purely through human thought and endeavour. As it turned out, this fear was well-founded. From the 13th century onwards in Europe, there was an increasing separation of rational thinking from belief in the authoritative teachings of the church.

A generalised uncertainty as to how knowledge could be obtained eventually gave rise to a renewed interest in one of the Ancient Greek movements, scepticism, which denied the possibility of knowledge about anything whatsoever. As a response to the challenge presented by the sceptics, the 17th century philosopher René Descartes attempted to show that some things can be established through the use of reason, including the existence of God.

Whereas Aquinas had suggested that the qualities of God can only be known through revelation, Descartes proposes that through the correct use of our intellect, we can be assured not only that God exists, but that he possesses certain attributes. Descartes' method is to doubt everything he has previously accepted, and on the basis of this approach, whatever remains will be revealed to be absolutely true and beyond doubt. He begins by doubting both the evidence of the senses and humans' powers of logic in areas such as mathematics. Descartes also posits the idea that an all-powerful Creator could have made us in such a way that we were deceived regarding our basic knowledge of the world. Alternatively there could be an evil demon who was the cause of such a deception. Descartes' solution to the extreme form of doubt that would result from exercises of this kind is to seek a foundation for knowledge within the contents of his own mind. He reasons that the one thing he can never doubt is that he is thinking, since this is the case even when he is being deceived.⁵ The performance of the attempt to doubt his own existence shows that his existence as a thinking being is itself beyond doubt. This conclusion he describes as "clear", in that it is manifest to his attentive mind, and "distinct", in that it is separate from all other ideas. Descartes then asserts that anything perceived clearly and distinctly by the intellect is true.

In the same manner as he knows his own existence, Descartes believes that he has a clear and distinct idea of the supremely perfect being.⁶ His argument is that “God” represents something so perfect, that Descartes himself could not have been the cause of such an idea. Therefore God must exist as the only possible cause of the perfection contained in Descartes’ conception of him. This conclusion is regarded as having the same kind of self-evidence as the facts of mathematics. Descartes also suggests that because he is limited and imperfect, he could not have created himself, since if he had done so, he would have given himself a perfect nature. The awareness of his imperfection is attributed to the idea that there must be a perfect being who has implanted within him the ideas of perfection and imperfection, since this kind of thinking would not arise from a human’s interaction with the world. Furthermore, if God did not exist, Descartes’ mind alone, he claims, could not have given him the kind of assurance he experiences that he has access to the truth.

A challenge to Descartes’ argument is that people who are aware of self-evident or necessary truths such as those of mathematics, may not have a clear idea of a supreme being – or any kind of personal creator. His theories in general cannot be detached from his experiences of life, not the least significant of which would be his religious upbringing, and the fact that belief in God was generally assumed in the society of his day. Descartes’ basic spiritual orientation is evidenced in the claim he makes that God revealed certain things to him in dreams.⁷

A problem Descartes addresses concerns the fact that he sometimes goes astray in his thinking, but he reasons that God as the all-powerful being could have created him so that he did not behave in such a way. The explanation provided by Descartes is that he tends to exercise his will in relation to matters he does not understand – yet he maintains that as long as he directs all his attention to a clear idea of God, he is not prone to any kind of error. Apart from the implication that his mind can reach a state of infallibility, Descartes’ evaluation of humans’ capacity to reason overlooks the opposing view contained in what is believed to be God’s written revelation of himself. For example, in the Hebrew scriptures God describes his thought and that of humans as being separated by a gulf comparable to that between the heavens and the earth.⁸ The reason for this gulf is that unlike God, humans are prone to sin, defined in a general sense as “missing the mark”. This concept covers a range of behaviours – from inaccuracy of comprehension to acts of moral failing. The Christian scriptures (also known as the New Testament) carry a similar depiction of human limitations. These texts indicate that it would be impossible for human beings to avoid error completely, regardless of the diligent attention they may give to the idea of God. Since Descartes relies on the clarity of his thinking to demonstrate God’s existence, his argument in this context is called into question.

The justification for Descartes’ knowledge, he claims, arises from the workings of his mind, the senses having been shown to be potentially deceptive. He therefore needs a way to connect his clear ideas with the kind of reality existing outside his mind. Although Descartes attempts to prove the existence of God through the exercise of reason, in a later work he admits that what is divinely revealed is “more certain than our surest knowledge”, and that these revelations are matters of faith and of the will.⁹ Together with most philosophers of that period, Descartes used the discoveries in the natural world to demonstrate the power of the human intellect. Yet he also relied on the belief in God’s involvement with his own thought process. Descartes ushered in what became known in the West as the period of rationalism, where there was a progressive decrease in traditional religious belief, and a corresponding increase in humans’ confidence in their ability to master the world.