IS GOD AN ABSTRACT ENTITY?

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Abstract

According to the abstract notion of God, God is an abstract object, and we use theological intuition to know about God. According to the concrete notion of God, by contrast, God is a concrete object, and we use the same cognitive faculties to know about God and other concrete objects. I raise the following objections to the abstract notion. It multiplies cognitive faculties beyond necessity. It conflicts with the Quine-Putnam indispensability argument, with the theological view that God created the world, with the traditional arguments for the existence of God, and with the notion of God in the Bible. The concrete notion works better than the abstract notion for religious practitioners.

Keywords: concrete, mathematical, realism, theological, intuition

1. Introduction

What properties does God have? How do we know about God? These are some of the perennial questions in the Philosophy of religion. This paper considers two rival conceptions of God that might be called 'the abstract notion' and 'the concrete notion'. On the abstract notion, God is an abstract object just like mathematical objects, and just as we use mathematical intuition to know about mathematical objects, so we use theological intuition to know about God [1]. On the concrete notion, by contrast, God is a concrete object just like stones and humans, and we use the same cognitive faculties to know about God and other concrete objects. This paper aims to show that the concrete notion works better than the abstract notion for religious practitioners, those who live religious lives.

The outline of this paper is as follows. In Section 2, I argue that the abstract notion multiplies cognitive faculties beyond necessity. In Section 3, I point out that the abstract notion conflicts with the Quine-Putnam indispensability argument [2, 3], contrary to what Victoria Harrison [1] claims. In Section 4, I argue that contrary to what Harrison claims, we cannot resolve the conflict between the abstract notion and the theological view that God created the world. In Section 5, I argue that the abstract notion conflicts with the traditional arguments for the existence of God. In Section 6, I expose a problem stemming from the gap between the abstract notion and the notion of God in the Bible. In Section 7, I reply to Harrison's claim that the abstract notion has two

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advantages over the concrete notion. This paper is intended to be useful to those who aim to appreciate the philosophical and practical implications of the abstract notion.

2. Theological intuition

To say that God is an abstract object implies that God lacks "spatial and temporal location" [1, p. 490], which in turn implies that God is imperceptible and acausal. An immediate objection to this notion of God is to ask how we acquire knowledge about God. To meet this objection, Harrison relies on "the comparison between mathematical intuition and theological intuition" [1, p. 491]. The idea is that just as mathematical knowledge comes from mathematical intuition, so theological knowledge comes from theological intuition. She says "that there is a non-physical connection between God and human minds mediated through the non-sensory knowledge available through theological intuition" [1, p. 493]. On her account, God and human beings are connected with each other via theological knowledge, and theological knowledge is produced by theological intuition.

Theological knowledge does not have "empirical content" [1, p. 494]. It follows that a visual image of God cannot be a mental representation of God. Consider the following imaginary dialogue between two interlocutors, A and B:

A: "I saw God yesterday. He smiled at me. Therefore, I know God loves me."

B: "You cannot say, 'I know God loves me', although you can say, 'I believe God loves me'."

A: "I can say, 'I know God loves me', because my religious experience came from theological intuition. Theological intuition produces theological knowledge."

B: "If God is an abstract object, he does not have a face, and hence he cannot smile at you. Your religious experience was delusory. You are just attaching the label 'theological knowledge' to a delusory experience."

A philosophical moral from this imaginary dialogue is that on the abstract notion of God, visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile and gustatory sensations about God are all delusory.

As it stands, Harrison's account of theological intuition is not full-blown. A full-blown account of theological intuition would provide answers to the following questions. What is the input of theological intuition? Can a visual image of God be its input? If so, how does theological intuition transform the visual image into a mental representation, which is free of the visual image? What does the mental representation of God look like? How does it differ from the mental representation of empty space? Why does a particular mental representation count as a mental representation of God, but not as a mental representation of something else? Is there a neural correlate for theological intuition? If so, can Neuroscience discover it? In the absence of answers to these perplexing questions, it is *ad hoc* to postulate theological intuition, i.e.

theological intuition is posited solely for the sake of fleshing out the abstract notion of God, and there is no independent reason for believing that theological intuition exists in our minds. It appears that it is just as difficult to establish the existence of theological intuition as it is to establish the existence of God.

Harrison would argue that if we believe that mathematical intuition exists in our minds, we should also believe that theological intuition exists in our minds. I object that there is an important difference between the outputs of mathematical intuition and those of theological intuition, viz., mathematical statements and theological statements. The former are not controversial, while the latter are controversial. Both mathematical realists and antirealists agree on whether, for example, $1 + 2 = 3$. By contrast, theists and atheists disagree on whether, for example, God created the world. Thus, theological intuition, even if we grant that it exists, might be a source of beliefs rather than a source of knowledge.

Harrison anticipates this objection and replies that just as mathematical geniuses have powerful mathematical intuition but ordinary people do not, so theological geniuses have powerful theological intuition but ordinary people do not. Since ordinary people's theological intuition is not powerful, there is no agreement on whether God created the world. She states this point as follows: "One response to this objection is to claim that the scope of mathematical intuition is, for many people, in fact rather limited. The mathematical intuition enjoyed by great mathematicians such as Gödel, Euler, or Gauss would show that most of us only experience a glimmer of mathematical insight through our own mathematical intuitions. The same might be the case in the theological domain, and this would make it much less significant that there seems to be an absence of widely shared intuitions among those who are not theological 'geniuses'." [1, p. 491]

What are we to make of Harrison's explanation of why a theological statement is controversial? In my view, it is similar to the explanations of why the statement that unicorns are real and the statement that goblins are real are controversial. Consider the following imaginary dialogue between an explainer and a sceptic:

Explainer: 'Unicorns and goblins are real.'

Sceptic: 'How do you know?'

Explainer: 'I have U-intuition, which generates knowledge about unicorns. I have G-intuition, which generates knowledge about goblins.'

Sceptic: 'I don't have such intuitions.'

Explainer: 'You do too, but your U-intuition and G-intuition are not as powerful as mine. For that reason, you and I disagree on whether unicorns and goblins are real.'

If you are not convinced of the explainer's explanations, neither would you be convinced of Harrison's explanation of why theists and atheists disagree on whether God created the world.

Cognitive scientists of religion would reject Harrison's suggestion that theological intuition exists in our minds. One of the fundamental assumptions of cognitive science of religion is that there is no cognitive faculty that is exclusively devoted to producing religious beliefs, but rather that the cognitive faculties that produce secular beliefs also produce religious beliefs. Thomas Lawson, one of the founders of cognitive science of religion, states that "whatever it takes to explain how minds work generally will be sufficient to explain how religious minds work" [4, p. 79]. Contrary to this fundamental assumption, Harrison postulates theological intuition, a special cognitive mechanism that putatively generates theological knowledge.

Harrison might reply that an assumption cannot function as an argument. In other words, why should we choose the fundamental assumption of cognitive science of religion and reject Harrison's assumption that theological intuition exists in our minds? My answer is that Harrison's assumption multiplies cognitive faculties beyond necessity, while the fundamental assumption of cognitive science of religion does not, i.e. the latter is more parsimonious than the former.

Harrison might now say that theological intuition is the same as mathematical intuition, and that mathematical intuition generates both mathematical knowledge and theological knowledge. If she advances this new suggestion, however, she would have the burden of defusing my following objection to mathematical realism [5]. Just as it multiplies cognitive faculties beyond necessity to say that we have a cognitive faculty exclusively devoted to generating knowledge about unicorns, so it multiplies cognitive faculties beyond necessity to say that we have a cognitive faculty exclusively devoted to generating knowledge about mathematical objects.

Harrison would object that my objection to mathematical realism creates the burden of providing alternative accounts of what mathematical objects are, how we acquire knowledge about mathematical objects, and how we should understand mathematical statements. My response to this objection is to invoke mathematical inferentialism, which consists of the following theses [6]. Mathematical statements facilitate inferences from some concrete statements to other concrete statements. They are true or false, depending on whether they are concretely adequate or not. We acquire mathematical knowledge by confirming their concrete consequences. Finally, there are no such things as mathematical objects. In the interest of saving space, I do not flesh out these theses and the advantages of mathematical inferentialism over other positions in Philosophy of Mathematics, such as mathematical realism and fictionalism.

3. The Quine-Putnam indispensability argument

What role does God play in our understanding of the world? This question is a challenging one on the abstract notion of God, for an abstract object does not have any causal efficacy on concrete objects such as stones and human beings.

Harrison appeals to the Quine-Putnam indispensability argument to answer the question. In this section, I negatively evaluate her appeal to that argument.

Harrison claims that God, although abstract, plays a vital role in our understanding of the concrete world, just as mathematical objects, although abstract, "play a vital role in our understanding of our environment and our ability to engage with it" [1, p. 493]. Exactly what role do mathematical objects play? Harrison answers that "the Quine-Putnam indispensability argument, which is widely held to be one of the principal arguments in support of realism about mathematical ontology, is an elaboration of this point" [1, p. 496]. Unfortunately, she does not say anything about how the Quine-Putnam indispensability argument illuminates the alleged vital role that God plays in our understanding of the concrete world.

In my view, the Quine-Putnam indispensability argument does not concern the noetic issue of what role mathematical objects play in our understanding of the concrete world, but rather concerns the epistemological issue of how we acquire knowledge about mathematical objects. It asserts that a mathematical statement is justified by being an indispensable component of a scientific theory, which is confirmed as a whole by observations.

However, it is one thing to say mathematical statements are confirmed by observations, and it is another to say that mathematical objects are abstract [5, p. 187]. The Quine-Putnam indispensability argument makes the epistemological claim that mathematical statements are justified by observations, while mathematical realism makes the metaphysical claim that mathematical objects are abstract. An additional argument is required to move from the epistemological claim to the metaphysical claim.

The Quine-Putnam indispensability argument does not go hand in hand with Harrison's account of how we acquire theological knowledge. According to the former, we acquire mathematical knowledge by confirming scientific theories, which implies that mathematical statements are justified by observations of the concrete world. According to the latter, by contrast, we acquire theological knowledge independently of observing the concrete world and through theological intuition. Harrison states clearly that the source of theological "knowledge cannot be the senses" [1, p. 490].

The Quine-Putnam indispensability argument does not claim that mathematical components of *any* scientific theory are confirmed by empirical evidence, but rather that mathematical components of our *best* scientific theories are confirmed by empirical evidence. Our best scientific theories are presumably those, which explain and predict many phenomena, such as the General Theory of Relativity. An interesting issue is whether theological theories are as highly confirmed by observations as our best scientific theories are. If they are, Harrison could suggest that the belief that God exists is an indispensable part of theological theories, and thus that we are justified in believing that God exists. I leave to future researchers the task of showing that theological theories are as highly confirmed by observations as our best scientific theories are.

Admittedly, the abstract notion of God has an advantage. A mathematical statement is traditionally regarded not as a contingent statement but rather as a necessary statement. For example, it is not contingently true but rather necessarily true that $1 + 2 = 3$. If God is an abstract object like mathematical objects, God would be a necessary being, i.e. it would be impossible for God not to exist, which implies that it would be impossible for God to commit suicide and that it would be illegitimate to ask who created God.

This advantage, however, disappears when Harrison appeals to the Quine-Putnam indispensability argument to argue that God plays a vital role in our understanding of the world. The Quine-Putnam indispensability argument presupposes that a mathematical statement is subject to empirical confirmation and disconfirmation, which implies that it is not a necessary statement but rather a contingent statement. Under such a framework, God is a contingent being, which implies that God can commit suicide and that it is legitimate to ask who created God.

Thus, we are back to the original question we started this section with: what role does God, an abstract object, play in our understanding of the concrete world? I leave the task of answering this question to defenders of the abstract notion of God. It seems to me that they will be better off if they do not rely on the Quine-Putnam indispensability argument.

4. The Creation of the World

The abstract notion of God conflicts with the theological view that God created the world. It seems that if God is acausal, then God cannot be the Creator of the world. Harrison anticipates this objection and attempts to defuse it as follows: "Talk of causation in Theology seems metaphorical, or analogical, at best. Our experience of causation comes from the spatio-temporal realm of physical objects, and we cannot responsibly extend our understanding of how causation operates in that realm to gain any purchase on the notion of divine causation. So the theological claim that God is the Creator does not entail, as far as we can judge, that it is necessary that God is involved in physical causal relations." [1, p. 492]

In other words, talk of causation in Theology is metaphorical, we cannot apply the human notion of causality to God's Creation of the world, and God's Creation of the world does not mean that God is the cause of the world.

What are we to make of Harrison's contention that talk of causation in Theology is metaphorical? Consider the following imaginary debate between a proponent and an opponent of Harrison's contention:

Proponent: 'It is metaphorical to say that God is the cause of the world.'

Opponent: 'It is also metaphorical to say that God sends believers to Heaven and disbelievers to hell. In reality, God rather sends believers to hell and disbelievers Heaven, and thus we should disbelieve in God.'

Proponent: 'It is inexplicable why God sends believers to hell and disbelievers to Heaven.'

Opponent: 'We cannot extend our understanding of how reward and punishment operate in the human realm to gain any purchase on the concepts of divine reward and punishment.'

The only way for the proponent to get around the opponent's *reductio ad absurdum* is to come up with a standard to distinguish between metaphorical and nonmetaphorical sentences in Theology, and then to say that it is a metaphorical claim that God is the cause of the world, but that it is a nonmetaphorical claim that God sends believers to Heaven and disbelievers to hell. In the absence of such a standard, Harrison's suggestion that a causal sentence in Theology is metaphorical opens a door to exegetical scepticism, according to which all sentences in Theology are inscrutable because we have no idea whether a particular sentence in Theology is metaphorical or nonmetaphorical, and hence we have no idea what it means.

Harrison's contention that talk of causation in Theology is metaphorical is in tension with the famous argument for the existence of God known as the argument from design, according to which just as a watch has a watchmaker, so a human being has an intelligent designer. Supporters of this argument would say that just as it makes sense to say that the watchmaker is the cause and the watch is the effect, so it makes sense to say that God is the cause and the world is the effect, and that we can apply the human notion of causality to God's Creation of the world.

Harrison's contention that talk of causation in theology is metaphorical also conflicts with Carlo Alvaro's theological view that God triggered the Big Bang [7], and hence God is the cause and the world is the effect. He says that "everything that begins to exist must have at least an efficient cause" [7, p. 3], and that "the Universe was brought into existence by something else", who is "eternal, spaceless, immaterial, and extremely powerful" [7, p. 9]. Note that Alvaro uses the term 'efficient cause' to characterize God in relation to the world. Alvaro does not have a problem with applying the human notion of causality to God's Creation of the world.

Harrison might reply that just because her view and Alvaro's view of how to understand talk of causation in theology is different from each other, it does not follow that her view is misguided. To put it differently, why should we choose Alvaro's view over her view? My answer is that her view opens a door to exegetical scepticism while Alvaro's view does not. Moreover, exegetical scepticism can be extended to non-theological sentences. As a result, we may wonder how we should interpret Harrison's philosophical sentences.

Finally, if God is non-temporal, He cannot even move His finger [8]. After all, to say that He moved His finger entails that His finger was in a certain place at a certain time, and that it was in another place at another time, which implies that time passed. Similarly, to say that God created the world means that his act of Creation had not yet occurred at a certain time, and that it had occurred at some later time, which implies that time passed. In short, if God is non-temporal, He is in a frozen state, He can do nothing, and He cannot create the world.

5. The traditional arguments

How does the abstract notion of God relate to the traditional arguments for the existence of God that are found in introductory Philosophy of religion textbooks? My answer is that it conflicts with them. In this section, I explore one by one how it conflicts with them.

The argument from the first cause holds that the first cause was the starting point of the chain of causes, and that the first cause is God; the abstract notion implies that God cannot be a cause, to say nothing of the first cause. The argument from design holds that God is the intelligent designer of complex things; the abstract notion implies that God cannot be a designer, let alone the intelligent designer. The argument from miracles holds that God makes miracles; the abstract notion implies that God cannot even cause an ordinary event, not to mention a miracle. The argument from religious experiences holds that some people have experienced God; the abstract notion implies that religious experiences are delusory, as we have seen in Section 2 above. Pascal's wager holds that God sends believers to Heaven and disbelievers to hell; the abstract notion implies that God cannot make any judgment on souls, for making a judgment requires the passage of time.

Let me turn to the ontological argument, according to which God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived. Harrison claims that God, the abstract object, "is something along the lines of a suitably qualified version of Anselm's 'that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-conceived'" [1, p. 494]. Unfortunately, she does not elucidate this qualified version of Anselm's notion of God. Admittedly, an interesting notion of God may come out of the abstract notion and the qualified version of Anselm's notion. I welcome future researchers to develop such a notion of God.

However, I ask future researchers to take into account the following imaginary dialogue between an atheist and a theist:

Atheist: 'I have a wife than whom no greater wife can be conceived.'

Theist: 'I am jealous of you. What does she look like? What does she do?'

Atheist: It is illegitimate to talk about her appearance and action because she is imperceptible, acausal and aspatiotemporal. She is an abstract object!'

Theist: 'I am no longer jealous of you. You cannot even visualize her face in your mind. How can she be your wife, to say nothing of a wife than whom no greater wife can be conceived? A woman in the concrete world is much greater than your alleged wife.'

Atheist: 'That is exactly what I want to say to you. You cannot even visualize God's face in your mind. How can he be your deity, let alone a deity than whom nothing greater can be conceived? A human being in the concrete world is much greater than your alleged deity.'

This imaginary dialogue is intended to show how difficult it would be for future researchers to develop a viable notion of God according to which he is the abstract object than which nothing greater can be conceived.

6. The biblical notion of God

The abstract notion of God is remote from the concrete notion of God in the Bible, according to which God is dissimilar to human beings in the respect that He is more powerful than they, but He is similar to them in other respects. For example, He is a spatiotemporal being, He looks like a human being, and He can have human emotions. In this section, I expose a problem that arises from the gap between the abstract notion of God and the biblical notion of God.

It makes sense to worship God as defined by the Bible, but not to worship God as defined by Harrison. To say that God is nonspatial means that He does not have a shape, size and volume, which implies that He does not have a face. It is not clear to me what the difference is between worshiping such a being and worshiping empty space. After all, the abstract object cannot do anything to you any more than empty space can do something to you. To worship empty space is a symptom of irrationality, and thus it might be a symptom of irrationality to worship an abstract object.

How can we worship a non-temporal being? To say that God is non-temporal means that God is not capable of having emotions, such as love, hatred, sorrow, and so forth. After all, to say that God has an emotion means that He did not have it a certain time but did have it at some later time, which implies that time passed. An atemporal God is an inanimate object like a rock. It is not clear to me what the difference is between worshiping an abstract object and worshiping an inanimate object. It is a symptom of irrationality to worship an inanimate object, and thus it might be a symptom of irrationality to worship an abstract object.

Ludwig Feuerbach would agree with my foregoing objection to the abstract notion of God [9]. According to him, the essence of religion is that subjects are converted into objects, and the object is converted into the subject. When we think about God, we are subjects and God is the object, but when God thinks about us, God is the subject and we are objects. Religious practitioners not only think about God but also think about how God would think about them. When they think about how God would think about them, they are converted into objects, and God is converted into the subject in a sense. Under the framework of the abstract notion of God, however, such conversions cannot occur because God is an abstract object. An abstract object does not have consciousness, and we cannot even imagine how an abstract object would think about us. Therefore, an abstract object does not qualify as a deity, and religious practitioners would not choose an abstract object as the target of their worship.

Cognitive scientists of religion would also agree with my objection to the abstract notion of God. According to cognitive science of religion, one of the cognitive systems that generate religious beliefs is the Theory of Mind (ToM). ToM is a cognitive system devoted to interpreting others' minds, enabling us to attribute mental states to others. Religious practice involves constantly interpreting God's mind. Women are better at interpreting others' minds, including God's mind, than are men; for this reason, they tend to be more

religious than men [10]. If the concrete notion of God were replaced with the abstract notion of God in religious institutions, ToM would have no place in religious practice, and the number of religious practitioners would plummet.

Cognitive scientists of religion would also say that the abstract notion of God is maximally counterintuitive while the concrete notion of God in the Bible is minimally counterintuitive, given that on the abstract notion, God is excessively dissimilar to human beings, while on the concrete notion, God is moderately dissimilar to human beings. Minimally counterintuitive concepts can be more easily retained in our memory than intuitive concepts and maximally counterintuitive concepts [11]. Again, if the concrete notion of God were replaced with the abstract notion of God in religious institutions, the number of religious practitioners would plummet.

7. Two putative advantages

Harrison presents two advantages of the abstract notion of God over the concrete notion of God. I argue against the putative advantages in this section.

The first purported advantage is that "a God who was located within space-time would surely be a limited God (that is, limited to some particular space and some particular time), whereas a God without a particular spatial or temporal position could - like the number 3 - be simultaneously accessible at all times and places (which would seem to be an obvious theological desideratum)" [1, p. 494-494]. In short, an aspatiotemporal God is more accessible to us than a spatiotemporal God is.

As I argued in Section 2 above, however, it multiplies cognitive faculties beyond necessity to postulate theological intuition, it is just as difficult to establish the existence of theological intuition as it is to establish the existence of God, and it is not clear whether theological intuition, even if it exists, is a source of knowledge or a source of beliefs. If God is a spatiotemporal being, He can be causally connected with us, and hence we do not need to postulate theological intuition to give a story of how we acquire knowledge (or beliefs) about God. It appears to me that a spatiotemporal God is more accessible to us than an aspatiotemporal God is.

The second purported advantage is "that a God who was an object located within space-time, and possessing the capability to enter into physical causal relations facilitated by that, would seem to face a particularly challenging form of the problem of evil" [1, p. 494]. Unfortunately, Harrison does not provide any account of how the abstract notion of God allows for a better response to the problem of evil. Therefore, we should think for ourselves about how the abstract notion of God relates to the problem of evil.

If God is aspatiotemoral, He cannot have emotion, He cannot have knowledge, and He cannot have power. Accordingly, He cannot be omnibenevolent, omniscient or omnipotent. Belief in such a being is certainly compatible with the existence of evil. Therefore, believers in an aspatiotemporal

God can confidently declare that they do not have the burden of solving the problem of evil.

Would religious practitioners invoke the abstract notion of God to solve the problem of evil? My answer is 'No', for the abstract notion of God has implications that religious practitioners would find disagreeable, as I argued in the previous sections. Imagine that believers in empty space declare that they do not have the burden of solving the problem of evil because belief in empty space is compatible with the existence of evil. Such a declaration is a declaration of pyrrhic victory. The same holds for the declaration of believers in an abstract object.

8. Conclusion

Harrison suggests that God is an abstract object, and that theological intuition generates knowledge about God. I object that the abstract notion of God multiplies cognitive faculties beyond necessity. There is a gap between the abstract notion of God and the concrete notion of God in the Bible. Those who prefer the abstract notion to the concrete notion would have to give up the theological view that God created the world, give up the traditional arguments for the existence of God, and assume the burden of explicating the difference between worshiping an abstract object and worshiping empty space. Therefore, religious practitioners should prefer the concrete notion to the abstract notion. Let me finish this paper with a slogan: 'God cannot be an abstract entity'.

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