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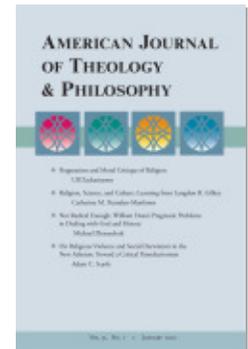
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Pragmatism and Moral Critique of Religion

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I. Introduction

Moral considerations and critique have become an ever more important part of contemporary popular and intellectual discussions of religion, at least in the Western world. As part of this development, a significant number of theologians have paid increasing attention to pragmatic approaches to religion, not least to the openings such approaches offer with regard to critical moral reflection on religious practices and beliefs. Thinkers such as Gordon Kaufman, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Mary Daly, and Sallie McFague insist that sound theological reflection on God and religious practices requires an awareness of, and a responsibility for, the social and moral consequences of the different doctrines and metaphors that we embrace and advocate.¹

When you turn to theology's intellectual sister-discipline, philosophy of religion, the picture is strikingly different. Among mainstream Anglo-American philosophers of religion, sympathy for the "pragmatic turn" is virtually nonexistent. Philosophers within this mainstream complain that the pragmatic turn blurs the separate questions of what *is* true and what we think *should* be true. Reality rarely conforms to our wishes, they point out, so why expect that this is the case with God?²

Of course, you can respond here, as some theologians have, that God radically transcends our conceptual and epistemic abilities, and that it is this precarious epistemological position that forces us to take recourse to pragmatic

1. Some classical examples: Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) and *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (London: The Women's Press, 1986); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*, new ed. (London: SCM Press, 1989).

2. Mikael Stenmark, "Theological Pragmatism: A Critical Evaluation," *Heythrop Journal* 41 (1999): 187–98; Peter Byrne, *God and Realism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 168–75; William Alston, "Realism and the Christian Faith," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 38 (1995), 37–60; Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1990).

approaches. However, a number of philosophers remain dissatisfied with this response since they believe that we *can* say quite a lot about God and God's properties, both at a high level of abstraction (with the help of natural theology) and at a much more concrete level (on the basis of revelation and numinous experience). As long as these "methods" appear to function well, there is little sympathy for pragmatic approaches.

In these "post-Rortian" times, lack of sympathy from philosophical quarters is probably experienced as less alarming than it was (say) fifty years ago. The foundationalist view of philosophy, eloquently criticized by Richard Rorty in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, has gradually given way to conversationalist approaches, on which philosophy is one among several vocabularies we have developed to cope with intellectual and practical problems. However, even in this view, the way we think and talk within one vocabulary matters for other vocabularies, whether we will it or no—just look at mainstream philosophy of religion's responses to the pragmatic turn. Hence my question: how can we philosophically articulate an understanding of religious practices on which moral considerations and critique are afforded the central role they have in contemporary discussion of religion?

My main motive, then, for raising this question is that as long as mainstream Anglo-American philosophers of religion continue to treat the pragmatic turn with considerable scepticism, it is only too easy for other theologians and religious authorities to dismiss it as inappropriate or confused. Besides that, I would also expect that our thinking on these matters would be improved by a better understanding of the role moral considerations and critique play in the way religious practices function and develop.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to explain why a pragmatic approach to religion, where moral considerations and critique are a natural element of our ongoing reflections, is no "second-best" approach that we must adopt for lack of better alternatives. In fact, once we spell out the implications of a pragmatic analysis of the ethics and psychology of belief, we can see that there are really no serious alternatives to a pragmatic approach in this context.³ Throughout

3. This also helps set my approach apart from other pragmatic approaches to religion such as Jerome Paul Soneson's and Sami Pihlström's. Soneson draws on a pragmatic philosophical anthropology to discuss religious pluralism but not to any significant extent the prospects of moral critique of religious practices. See J. P. Soneson, *Pragmatism and Pluralism: John Dewey's Significance for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). Sami Pihlström also discusses religion from the perspective of a pragmatic philosophical anthropology, but does not contrast it with other approaches, and pays less attention to the prospects of a moral critique of religion. See Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology: Understanding our Human Life in a Human World*, American University Series 5, vol. 186 (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

the paper, I make use of William Alston's numinous experience-based approach as a contrast.

Accordingly, I start with a critical discussion of William Alston's argument from numinous experience, an argument that, as I show, tacitly relies on the method for settling beliefs that C. S. Peirce famously labelled *the method of authority*, a method that notoriously lacks the ability to adjudicate between conflicting authorities. Next, I turn to the more constructive task of presenting a pragmatic analysis of religion which relates it to *life orientations*, systems of habits and practices we draw on in our interaction with the existential and moral aspects of our lives. I show that in this analysis, moral considerations enter (or should, at least) into the very formation of religious practices; hence, moral critique of religious practices is a natural part of the way religious practices function. I conclude with some remarks on the persistence of methods of authority within religion.

II. Alston and the Argument from Religious Experience

When I talk of an "epistemic paradigm" that dominates contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, I mean the view that philosophy of religion's central task is to determine whether religious belief is rationally acceptable, and that the answer to this question depends on the probability of the existence of a being such as God. Arguments for God's existence have traditionally been formulated within the tradition of natural theology, but today, more energy is spent on religious, particularly numinous, experience, and the evidential value thereof. One of the leading advocates of this approach is William Alston.

Alston aims to show that Christian practices are epistemically autonomous in the sense that they have their own distinct source of belief—numinous experience—and their own ways of testing those beliefs. Numinous experience is the subclass of religious experiences where God, as traditionally conceived, is the "object of experience"; hence, Alston even refers to numinous experience as "perception."⁴

It is important to note from the outset that Alston's psychology of belief is based on what John Dewey once categorized as a sensationalist analysis of experience.⁵ On this view, human beings are constantly bombarded with stimuli, which literally coerce us to form beliefs about the nature and existence of an

4. Alston's main work on numinous experience bears the title *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

5. John Dewey, "An empirical survey of empiricisms," in *The Later Works of John Dewey: 1935–1937*, vol. 11, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 76ff.

external world. In time, we learn to weed out some experiences as untrustworthy, but only by contrasting them with other experiences that we trust.

Hence, Alston invites us to understand the human cognitive landscape as individuated by different *doxastic practices* that have formed to deal with different types of experiential input. Some input is external in the sense that we take it to come from sources outside ourselves, while some is internal, such as memories. To deal with the various types of input, human beings have developed different doxastic practices with practice-specific *overrider systems*. The paradigm doxastic practice is sense perception (henceforth SP) because of the central role it plays in human belief formation and the immense practical value it has.

But despite SP's practical indispensability, it remains, from an epistemic point of view, groundless in the sense that we are unable to prove in any noncircular fashion that its account of reality is correct. The reason is simple: we have no means of comparing our experiential account of reality with that reality as it is in itself, but only with other experiential accounts, which already presupposes SP's general reliability. SP's ability to give an accurate picture of the external world remains an unproven assumption, no matter how much we check its credibility. This is no cause for alarm since there are weighty pragmatic grounds for considering SP reliable—it is socially established, and it has an impressive track record and a functioning overrider system.⁶

Alston now claims that these characteristics also hold true for *Christian mystical perception* (henceforth CMP), the doxastic practice developed to deal with alleged experiences of God. It is socially established, its track record is impressive (numinous experiences have changed many people's lives in a religious direction), and it has its own overrider system. Of course, CMP's overrider system is not at all like SP's, but that is, according to Alston, only to be expected: anyone familiar with Christian images of God realizes immediately that the "repeatability requirement" so central in SP, does not function in CMP.⁷ Instead, the crucial test of CMP's overrider system is whether an alleged numinous experience conforms to orthodox doctrine, regardless of whether it supplies us with new information (for instance, about God's attitude towards us right now), or merely updates us on what we already "know" (for instance, that God is powerful).⁸ A second test, logically secondary to the first, requires that the experience should produce (in

6. Alston, *Perceiving God*, chapter 3. An alternative strategy, one that Alston rejects, is to continue to use SP, while remain agnostic about its reliability; that is, leave the question of whether beliefs produced by SP are actually true, and not merely rationally acceptable, open.

7. For instance, Alston, *Perceiving God*, 209ff.

8. *Ibid.*, 206f.

the experiencing subject and others) the Christian fruits of the spirit, as defined by the Christian tradition.

Alston's argument for the reliability of CMP thus amounts to an analogy argument: we cannot consistently accept SP as a reliable doxastic practice and at the same time dismiss CMP as unreliable—they are simply too similar. Alston admits that certain factors weaken his analogy argument, primarily the fact that CMP is more “locally” employed, and is contradicted by the doxastic practices of the other world religions. Nevertheless, Alston still holds that these differences are not decisive enough to rob the analogy argument of its force.⁹

III. Pragmatism on the Ethics and Psychology of Belief

Pragmatists consistently reject sensationalist analyses of experience that equate “what we cannot help believing” with “what we immediately experience to be the case.” C. S. Peirce famously proposed an alternative approach to the psychology of belief in “The Fixation of Belief.” For Peirce, confidence in a belief is neither forced on us by raw impressions, nor something we deliberately adopt: it is the result of practical or theoretical tests of whether that particular belief can serve as a basis for fruitful interaction with the environment. Hence, *the method of inquiry* is superior to other methods of fixing belief.¹⁰

Peirce's analysis of different methods of settling belief is particularly useful here since it helps us see why Alston's analogy between SP and CMP does not work. Shortly, I will show that in Alston's approach, CMP operates with a method of authority which clearly sets it apart from SP. First, however, I wish to say a little more about the pragmatic psychology of belief. Why can we not simply relieve doubt by putting our trust in an authority? Well, first of all, pragmatists point out that beliefs are not under our voluntary control in this sense, because they are no mere whims, but guides for conduct. Doubt can only be relieved when a belief proves itself in practice—or when we at least have good reason to think that it would prove itself in practice, were it put to the test. This focus on fruitfulness in practical interaction also indicates that any belief has to be open to revision, if it fails to “perform” in the future. Hence, there is no real opposition between an antiskeptical and a fallibilistic attitude.

Someone may object that my account places too much emphasis on the dy-

9. Alston's treatment of religious diversity reveals, in my opinion, the problems which arise if you adhere to a method of authority for settling belief, a point I will return to later. For more on Alston's analysis of religious diversity, see Alston, *Perceiving God*, chapter 7.

10. C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers by Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol.5, *Pragmatism and Pragmatism*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1935), § 358–387.

namic character of belief, and too little on the conservative strand of pragmatism. James, for instance, stresses the conservative nature of pragmatism when he notes that we always “keep unaltered as much of our old knowledge, as many of our old prejudices and beliefs, as we can.”¹¹ However, James’s conservatism is quite different from Alston’s, because it does not categorically privilege the past over the present; it is a methodological rule that applies whenever the need for revision is already acknowledged, and the question is *what* and *how much* to revise, not whether we should make any revisions *überhaupt*.

On Alston’s account, however, CMP falls into just the kind of “vicious” conservatism pragmatists avoid. By playing a decisive role in CMP’s override system, orthodox doctrine becomes an authority that cannot be questioned; hence, novelty is ruled out in advance, and so is moral critique of the reigning orthodoxy. What can moral considerations achieve against valid claims to have perceptual knowledge of God’s will? Concretely, this means that Christian beliefs and practices become immune to revision. Appeal to the Christian fruits of the spirit makes little difference here, as long as you insist that it is orthodox doctrine itself that specifies what these fruits are like.

Alston would probably respond by admitting that CMP is indeed static, but that this makes it no worse off than SP. That claim, however, is unjustified. Sense perception often causes us to revise received opinion, and theoretically, it could even prove to us that all physical objects had ceased to exist (if we stopped seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and touching them). CMP could not in any parallel fashion teach us that God had ceased to exist, because such experiences fail to conform to orthodox doctrine, and are thus dismissed as unveridical.

Alston’s advocacy of a method of authority is, in my view, a natural consequence of his sensationalist understanding of experience. But there are certainly other things that may render the method of authority attractive, not least that it accords well with the normative self-understandings of most religious traditions. However, there are serious problems with these normative self-understandings, for instance, when it comes to explaining what is going on when devout believers submit their own religious tradition to moral critique. On the method of authority, such believers must either be confused or no genuine believers at all. Pragmatism offers, I will claim, a more plausible approach.

IV. Life Orientations: A Pragmatic Alternative

One central feature of pragmatic thought is its account of the human being as engaged in a continuous and virtually never-ending series of transactions

11. William James, *Pragmatism* (1907; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 64.

with the environment in order to uphold—and frequently restore—a state of equilibrium with that environment. To that end, human beings develop an immense number of practices and habits to draw upon. At times, however, our expectations are challenged and our purposes frustrated. This is when we become truly engaged and undertake *inquiry* to render the indeterminate situation determinate again. Inquiry thus presupposes that we have the ability to selectively resist the force of habit, although we at the same time remain completely dependent on the habits and expectations that are not presently called into doubt.

The environment human beings inhabit cannot be adequately described in any purely materialistic vocabulary; other irreducible elements are the environment's aesthetic, moral, and existential properties. The environment is threatening or promising, meaningful or meaningless, beautiful or ugly, and so on. These features, too, require responses from us, and to that end, we develop different existential/moral habits and practices throughout life. The existential and moral choices we make, together with the ideals (discernible in those choices) that we embrace, form what I will call a *life orientation*, which reveals a more or less coherent conception of human flourishing—what we think life might be like at its best. Our judgements about good and bad, right and wrong, and so on emerge in the gap between what we hope and believe life—with all its potential and limitations in full view—could be like, and the way it turns out for ourselves and others. Life orientations thus play a significant motivational and guiding role, although we should not think of them as some entity existing apart from the practices of acting and making judgements that we engage in all the time: from a pragmatic perspective, that is exactly what a life orientation consists of.

Not all people make the same judgements, or act the same way when facing challenges of an existential or moral nature. Hence, it is natural to speak of people having different life orientations, where some elements overlap, and others differ.

Turning now to religion, it seems natural for a pragmatist to understand religious practices as responses to various problematic situations of an existential nature, responses that gradually have taken institutionalized forms in the shape of different religious traditions. While I think this understanding is fruitful and sound, we should be careful to keep separate the institutionalized systems of thought on the one hand, and the often much more dynamic and manifold life orientations people develop throughout life, on the other. Sure enough, religious traditions present us with symbols, pictures, and narratives with a clear bearing on questions about what a good human life is like, but that should not be taken to imply that religious believers merely take over en-

tire conceptions of human flourishing and then see their whole lives in these terms. In fact, such an understanding would render religion's appeal difficult to comprehend, because in such a view, we cannot make sense of the intuitive idea that religion makes sense of life: the religious believer cannot but see life in a religious way, so what is there to make sense of?

This is not to claim that there are some pure existential or moral experiences available that enable us to see life as it really is, but only that there is no completely controlling system of thought. The narratives, symbols, and teachings of religious traditions can influence our life orientations in different ways and to different degrees. That holds especially true for citizens of modern societies. Accordingly, we should neither assume that all adherents to a religious tradition share the same life orientation, nor that religious traditions merely influence those who openly endorse them.

A life orientation thus consists of a number of habits and more or less explicitly formulated views of human life, and what constitutes a good human life. These both reveal themselves in, and guide, conduct, mainly in regard to situations of existential significance. Situations of existential significance are, for instance, situations which concern matters of life and death, illness and recovery, love and hatred, success and failure/loss, and so on. Any life orientation that aspires to be adequate must offer satisfactory responses to such situations, and a religious tradition that aspires to be adequate must show appreciation for these situations and offer tools that help us cope with them.

To talk of life orientations in terms such as "adequate" and "satisfactory" may, however, raise concerns similar to those raised by James's controversial defense of the will (right) to believe, namely, that it seems to quickly degenerate into a right to make believe.¹² However, this critique completely overlooks the intimate relation between life orientations and conduct: a life orientation that treats death as something we should not worry about may be heroic, but soon breaks down in the face of life's realities and our actual responses to death. Death poses a problem for us because most of us prefer, most of the time, to live. Nevertheless, that death is problematic does not imply that a satisfactory response to death must either deny its reality, or render it insignificant. In fact, such responses fail to hold the realities of life in full view, and fly in the face of the experiences we make throughout life. A more satisfactory response may be

12. Thus James: "Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds." William James, *The Will to Believe and other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 11. John Hick dismisses this position on the grounds that it "constitutes an unrestricted license for wishful thinking." Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 60.

one that acknowledges death's reality, but also teaches us that despite death's omnipresence, life is valuable and worthwhile, and perhaps also that there are values, such as freedom, that are actually worth dying for. Talk of "satisfactory," then, means something substantially different from "to our immediate liking."

Perhaps some critics of pragmatism would consider even this too much of a "will to make believe." Might we not, for instance, be tempted to adopt crude compensatory views of an afterlife, which renders the injustices and sufferings of this world unimportant? Well, I would say that the same response can be made here: although such life orientations may function as psychological defense mechanisms for people living under extremely harsh conditions, they can hardly have any appeal for the large majority of people, simply because they belie our fundamental experiences that life *does* matter. In all, I believe that relating the adequacy of life orientations to their ability to function in a satisfactory manner does not create any very significant risk for an overly permissive "will to make believe."

V. Pragmatism and the Persistence of the Method of Authority

One of the most exciting features of the pragmatic analysis of life orientations I have sketched here, is that it breaks with the predominant foundationalist analyses of religion (and nonreligious ideologies) of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of religion. According to a foundationalist approach, religious believers cannot but see and understand everything from the perspective prescribed by their religious commitments, which means that this commitment becomes logically prior to all the experiences we make throughout life.¹³ On this view, it thus remains a mystery how someone can experience her religious tradition as problematic, since that would require an ability we lack, namely, the ability to take a critical stance towards (parts of) our life orientations. Once we understand religion and religious practices as linked to life orientations, it becomes easier to see how encounters with situations of moral and existential significance can call for revisions not only in life orientations, but also in the religious traditions that these life orientations draw on and are related to.

There is a close link between methods of authority and foundationalist approaches to religion, because it is only on a foundationalist approach that the method of authority looks plausible. Methods of authority presuppose that when confronted with alternative views, we can settle doubt in one of two

13. I have given a more detailed discussion of foundationalist analyses of religion in Ulf Zackariasson, "A Critique of Foundationalist Conceptions of Comprehensive Doctrines in the Religion in Politics-Debate," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 65 (Feb. 2009), 11–28.

ways: either by choosing to adhere to an authority, or by being so set in our adherence to one authority that doubt does not really arise. Christian belief, for example, can then only be criticized by outsiders, but these outsiders adhere to a non-Christian authority that Christians distrust. Hence, such critique cannot matter much anyway. Once we do away with the unfortunate tendency to equate religious traditions and life orientations, we can more easily see how critique can have an “internal” character that this simple picture neglects.

The above analyses of a pragmatic psychology of belief (and its related ethics of belief) might make it sound as if virtually no one could possibly adhere to a method of authority. If so, then why do orthodox religious traditions still exercise so much power over people? Well, granted that this is actually the case (a question I return to shortly), I would, somewhat speculatively, first point out that in the postmodern era we live in, there is a longing for commitment, for subjective certainty amidst all the objective uncertainty. Consider the following passage from a song recorded by The Alan Parsons Project:

To touch the sky
A dreamer must be
Someone who has more imagination than me
To reach the stars
A dreamer must fly
Somehow he must live more of a lifetime than I¹⁴

I think this longing for a full commitment that defies uncertainty is connected to the foundationalist thinking I have criticized in this paper, but it is also a broader human and social phenomenon, which I cannot examine further here. Second, there are certainly other pressures at work in people’s lives, such as the sanctions and social disapproval they would have to endure if they dare to question their religious commitments; after all, religious commitment is much more than just endorsing a belief system. People’s religious commitments are often further strengthened by other factors, for instance, the demonizing of outsiders and vivid teachings about the eternal torment that awaits the infidels, and so on. Now, recourse to threats and social sanctions is not very attractive from a religious point of view, according to which genuine devotion should arise out of free personal choice, not from coercion. I think many people would question the genuineness of a professed faith that was motivated by the social stigma involved in abandoning it. So while these factors partially explain the persistence of the method of authority, they certainly go nowhere towards justifying it.

14. Alan Parsons and Eric Woolfson, “Inside Looking out,” *Gaudi*, Arista Records, 1987.

VI. Concluding Comments

The time has come to substantiate the claims I made at the outset of this article. A pragmatic philosophical articulation of life orientations and religion helps us understand why moral considerations and critique have an important role to play in reflection on religion. My pragmatic articulation also allows thinkers of a pragmatic inclination to be on the offensive against mainstream Anglo-American philosophy of religion, particularly its assumption that if we abandon the epistemic paradigm, anything goes within religion. The pragmatic approach sketched here shows why this accusation is doubly unfair. First, as long as we retain a link to life orientations, there are clear limits to what we can and cannot claim in a religious setting. Second, Alston's recourse to a method of authority indicates that mainstream philosophy of religion's epistemic focus actually puts it in a more problematic position than pragmatism here, because the method of authority cannot effectively resist a kind of relativism where authorities clash.

As already mentioned, when I speak of a pragmatic philosophical articulation of the practices of criticism and justification as superior to its mainstream counterparts, I am not claiming that it is more in accordance with the normative self-understandings of religious traditions. On the contrary, these self-understandings emphasize the infallible and static nature of religion and religious belief. Fortunately for the pragmatist, there are good grounds for contesting such foundationalist analyses. Historical and contemporary studies reveal, for instance, that religious fundamentalism is a rather recent phenomenon, and also that—at least where citizens of modern societies are concerned—more and more people select different elements from religious traditions without uncritically accepting everything.¹⁵ Besides, religious conceptions of human life influence not only believers, but also nonbelievers, which indicates that there are no clear boundaries between those on the inside and those on the outside of a tradition.

I propose that when we speak of philosophical articulations as more or less adequate, we should rather (a) see whether they are capable of making sense of the practices of critique and justification we find around us, and (b) ask whether different articulations can offer insights that help us develop and

15. For the relatively recent emergence of fundamentalism as a significant religious movement in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, see Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000); for religion in modern societies, see W. A. Inghart & C. Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

improve those practices. On both these counts, I would say that pragmatism has a decisive advantage over its mainstream counterpart.

A pragmatic approach thus helps us articulate something we, in a sense, knew all along, namely, that moral considerations matter for religious traditions, and that religious traditions cannot afford to ignore such criticisms. Here, the pragmatic psychology of belief and the related ethics of belief are helpful and plausible: confidence in a belief is not something we achieve by fiat, or by surrendering to the dictates of some authority. Beliefs need to prove their worth in interaction with the environment, and this is where methods of authority fail us. In comparison, the pragmatic turn looks significantly more promising, and deserves further philosophical and theological development.

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