

Platonic Atheism

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Abstract: The five articles selected for this issue of *Religious Studies Archives* develop a non-theistic approach to religion and spirituality that can be called Platonic atheism. Platonic atheism emerges as these five articles are set into place and put into dialog with each other. One of the central figures of Platonic atheism is Iris Murdoch, whose work deserves to be revived and studied very carefully by contemporary philosophers of religion. Platonic atheism is an alternative to Christian theism. And while it may be considered as a kind of naturalism, it differs from the scientism found in much contemporary atheism. Strands of Platonic atheism are interwoven into many articles in *Religious Studies*, from its beginning to the present.

Religious Studies has always shown a welcome openness to non-theistic approaches to religiosity and spirituality. One of these approaches can be called *Platonic atheism*, and it makes the theme of the present archival issue. Platonic atheism affirms both concrete things and abstract objects. The abstract objects, which are entirely mind-independent, include mathematical objects and laws, as well as axiological objects and laws. The axiological objects include things like the Platonic Good, as well as moral values. The axiological laws include things like axiarchic principles which bring concrete worlds into existence, moral laws like the categorical imperative or golden rule, and karmic laws which establish justice across lives. The Platonic atheist says the work attributed to divine persons (like God) is more accurately assigned to the system of abstract laws and objects. The outlines of this Platonic atheism will appear as the five articles in this issue are set into place.

The first article in this issue is Quentin Smith's "An analysis of holiness" (1988). Smith shows how to understand holiness without assuming theism. Smith's article is one instance of a much larger project among non-theists: giving non-theistic meanings to terms traditionally thought to require theism. This project is also discussed elsewhere in *Religious Studies*, namely, in Robbins' "When Christians become naturalists" (1992). Although this article is not selected for this archival issue, it is worth mentioning. There Robbins discusses Dewey's naturalization of the term "God". For Dewey, the term "God" designates ideal values as they appear in human conduct.

Smith defines four types of holiness: religious holiness, moral holiness, individually relative holiness, and metaphysical holiness. Each type of holiness is maximality relative to the class of things associated with that type. Focusing on the centrality of persons to religions, Smith says the religiously holy is maximal in the class of persons. He says the morally holy is maximal with respect to moral phenomena (such as laws, duties, acts, values, and so on). Holiness relative to an individual is that which is maximally valuable to that individual (it is sacredness). The metaphysically holy is maximal with respect to the class of existing things. So Smith's conception of holiness is generally Anselmian: holiness is unsurpassability.

Smith views the religiously holy as instantiated by the Anselmian God, a maximally perfect person. So far, no surprise. But the significance of his reasoning emerges as he distinguishes the other types of holiness. The morally holy is not identical with the religiously holy. A morally holy object need not be a person. Examples of impersonal morally holy objects include the Platonic form of the Good and the Kantian moral law. Likewise, the metaphysically holy need not be religiously holy. The metaphysically holy is the supreme being, which Smith identifies with being-itself. If these three types of holiness are carefully distinguished, then most theism amounts to a confusion. When theists say God is a maximally perfect *person*, they confuse the religiously holy with the metaphysically holy. And when Tillich said God is the ground of being (being-itself), he also confused the religiously holy with the metaphysically holy. And Dewey confused the religiously holy with the individually relative holy (the sacred).

The distinctions between these three types of holiness are interesting to Platonists. Plato talked about three extreme objects: the One, the Good, and the Divine Mind (the *Nous*). On Smith's view, these are conceptually distinct: the One is metaphysically holy, the Good is morally holy, and the Divine Mind is religiously holy. It is a vexed question whether Plato himself ever identified the One in his *Parmenides* with the Good in his *Republic*. But later Platonists like Plotinus did identify them. According to Smith, they must be kept apart. As Smith notes, Plotinus distinguished the One from the *Nous*. The *Nous* was God, but the One is wholly other than God. The complex and fascinating relations between the One of the *Parmenides* and the Christian God were discussed in another *Religious Studies* article (Capps, 1967) not in this issue.

One can wonder whether Smith has correctly identified religious holiness with maximally perfect personhood. Since the objects of religious devotion vary greatly across social groups, it is arguable that he should have defined religious holiness as a species of individually relative holiness. Maximally perfect persons are sacred to Abrahamic theists; but there are non-theistic religions (such as Buddhism). Perhaps Smith should have just classified maximally perfect personhood as the *personally holy*.

Consider Pythagoreanism. Echoing the Pythagoreans, Johnston (2009: 11) writes that "It is conceivable that mathematical reality taken as a whole is the Most Perfect Being, because it is utterly complete, beautiful, self-contained, and inherently intelligible." Or consider Stoicism. While some Stoics thought of the *Logos* as a personal (a kind of Cosmic

Zeus), others thought of it as the impersonal rationality of existence. The Stoics and Pythagoreans show that the Platonic *Nous* can be stripped of its mentality, leaving a purely logico-mathematical residue – the maximally perfect and purely rational structure of existence. Following Smith, Platonic atheists say this structure is *logically holy*. So the logically holy need not be personally holy. And to the extent that Pythagoreanism and Stoicism were religious, it will be religiously holy. The last article in this archival issue will focus on the impersonal religiously holy. But two articles elsewhere in *Religious Studies* (Le Blanc, 1993; Harrison, 2017) discuss the relations between mathematical and theological objects. These articles were not selected here, but are worth consideration.

The second article in this issue is Elizabeth Burns' "Iris Murdoch and the nature of the Good" (1997). Murdoch's work has been featured elsewhere in *Religious Studies* (Dunbar, 1978; Milligan, 2007, 2014; Burns, 2013). Nevertheless, Murdoch has seen little discussion among analytic philosophers of religion. One regrettable reason for this neglect is that Murdoch was a woman, and the work of women thinkers has all too often been wrongly ignored. She was known mostly as a novelist, and her presentation of her philosophical views was never systematic. Perhaps a more strictly philosophical explanation for this neglect is the polarization of analytic philosophy of religion into two apparently opposed camps: Christian theism and atheistic naturalism. Against this polarization, Murdoch developed a kind of Platonic atheism.

Murdoch talked frequently about the Platonic Good, and she explicitly denied its identity with God. The Good lacks the personal features which characterize God. To use Smith's terminology, the Good is morally but not religiously (or personally) holy. Moreover, the Good is above God, because it regulates God. This regulation was the topic of Plato's *Euthyphro*, discussed elsewhere in *Religious Studies* (Faber, 1985). Murdoch affirms that the Good is transcendental; but it magnetically pulls all human acts towards it. The acts of technical craft, artistic production, and social interaction can all be done well or poorly. We recognize degrees of goodness in all our acts and products. Now Murdoch revives the old degrees of perfection argument to say that the surpassable degrees of goodness entail an unsurpassable Good. Her revival of that argument is intriguing. Murdoch said she wanted "to use Plato's images as a sort of Ontological Proof of the necessity of the Good" (1992: 511). Burns wrote another article in *Religious Studies* on Murdoch's ontological argument (2013); and while that article is not included in this archival issue, it also deserves careful study.

For Murdoch, Platonic atheism is mostly an axiological position. Axiological principles, like principles of deontic logic, are eternal necessary truths. From the Platonic Good, Murdoch often turned to Kant and the categorical imperative. Murdoch regarded moral relativism as a disaster. She rejected the humanist notion that we can create our own moralities and values. On these points she was greatly impressed by World War Two, which she lived through. She thought that when we create our own moralities, we create horrors like fascism and communism. For our self-regulation, we require moral

truths which surpass us and which make demands on us. The Good is a guiding light which magnetically draws us towards it – yet it is always beyond us.

The third article in this issue is Leonard Angel's "Mystical naturalism" (2002). Theists say that mystical experiences somehow refer to or are about God. Atheistic naturalists often deny that mystical experiences have any aboutness at all: they are purely subjective events that at most reveal something about our minds. Against both the theists and the atheistic naturalists, Angel says the intentional content of mystical experience is the entire universe. Angel thus offers a kind of naturalistic mysticism. Another naturalistic mysticism is discussed elsewhere in *Religious Studies* (Perovich, 2011).

To develop his theory of mystical content, Angel begins with your brain: it tells itself a story about what it means to be a self – your ego is a psychological construction. But what is your true self? Angel walks a *via negativa*: your true self cannot just be your brain; it cannot just be your body; it cannot just be the system of things of which you are presently aware. He ends with maximal physical expansion: your true self is the entire universe. Your consciousness expands until it realizes the truth that "I am the All". But as your self expands, it also ceases to be yours. Narrow egohood is transcended: "I am the All" is equivalent to "I am Nobody". Angel sees this as a kind of Buddhist mysticism. Among more recent atheists, Sam Harris (2014) describes how Buddhist meditation can lead you to experience this egoless cosmic selfhood.

Angel's naturalistic mysticism relies on the surpassability which fascinates both Smith and Murdoch. Consciousness expands through ever greater degrees of awareness. Here Angel's mysticism should be put into dialog with Smith's conception of holiness. The mind proceeds through surpassable degrees of awareness until it reaches, in mystical experience, an unsurpassable awareness – and this is religiously holy. Besides its links with Buddhism, Angel's mystical naturalism has links to the mystical Platonism of Plotinus. And links between Plotinus and Buddhism were explored elsewhere in another article in *Religious Studies* (Armstrong & Ravindra, 1979).

The content of mystical experience is some sort of holy object. But which sort? The physical universe is surpassable in many ways. Perhaps an answer comes from Murdoch, who also valued mysticism. Not surprisingly, her mysticism pointed to the Good, that is, to the morally holy. Or perhaps the object of mystical consciousness is the logically holy. Using a piece of iron to scratch the Pythagorean proof of the infinity of prime numbers into the walls of his prison cell, Arthur Koestler had a mystical experience of the ultimate reality of the logically holy – the purely rational impersonal structure of being (Koestler, 1969: 428-30). Smith's distinction among types of holiness can do important work in clarifying or distinguishing between different types of mysticism.

The fourth article in this issue returns to the work of Iris Murdoch. It is Tony Milligan's "Love in dark times: Iris Murdoch on openness and the void" (2014). Something like "the void" has played a long role in Western metaphysics. Perhaps it somehow originates in the Plotinian concept of matter as utter privation of being and

goodness. But it probably first appears as a distinct concept in Jakob Boehme's idea of the abyss or groundlessness. Boehme seemed to portray God as emerging from this abyss when the abyss negated itself. This self-negation reappears in Heidegger's infamous slogan that the nothing noths itself. It also appears in the cosmogony of Charles Sanders Peirce. From the self-negation of non-being, being-itself emerges. Smith says being-itself is metaphysically holy; by symmetry, non-being is metaphysically unholy. Yet it need not be personally unholy: non-being is not the Devil. Concepts like non-being and being-itself are also purely logical concepts, and thus grounds for the logically holy. What is the religious significance of negation in logic?

According to Heidegger, we experience the nothingness in anxiety. For Murdoch, the void appears in our lives in the guise of *moral horrors*. To illustrate these horrors, Milligan turns to one of Murdoch's novels: *The Time of Angels*. Murdoch's novels reveal the particularities of people in their struggles to pursue the Good and escape the void. Our particular lives are morally fragile, they may rupture at any time, and the void is always ready to erupt in the wreckage. When a beloved family dies, the abyss pulls us in. Falling into the void, we no longer feel the magnetic pull of the Good; yet the Good still shines like a distant star, providing an opportunity for reorientation.

Milligan's article explores the moral virtues required to escape the void. At its most particular, these are the virtues needed to escape the death of a spouse. They are the virtues needed to find *love after love*. Drawing on Murdoch, Milligan discusses the personal problems associated with love after love: feelings of infidelity and guilt. And he talks about the social problems associated with love after love. There are jealous children and judgmental neighbors. So far one might wonder about the religious significance: many of us experience the deaths of our parents; many will experience the deaths of spouses; and some will experience the deaths of their children. But almost everybody also gets through it, painful as these experiences may be. Life goes on. So what does any of this have to do with the religious metaphysics of being or non-being?

It will probably come as no surprise that the answer involves the death of God. Nietzsche famously portrayed the death of God as a horrific loss, one which threatens the entire moral and political structure of Western society. Grief from that loss threatens to drive us collectively insane. Now Milligan brings in another theme from Murdoch: the eruption of the void generates delusions. Traumatic loss can lead to dissociative flight from reality and the delusional commitment to imaginary worlds. After the death of God, the egocentric pull of the void generates the delusion that we can create our own values. Humanity is the measure of all things. So the void produces political movements like fascism and communism. For Murdoch, the antidote to nihilism is love.

Likewise for Murdoch, the goodness of love derives in part from the fact that it pulls us outside of our selves. It is an *ecstasis* in which we recognize an *other* as having existence equal in value to the self. And Plato thought that love raises us up to the Good. The problem of love after love, expertly discussed by Milligan, has direct relevance for Platonic atheists. After the death of God and the loss of Christianity, what can we learn to

love now? Just as learning to love a new spouse (after the death of an old one) means building an entirely new way of life, so learning to love new forms of holiness (after the death of an old one) means building new moral and political institutions.

The fifth article in this archival issue is G. L. Doore's "Religion within the limits of the quest for the highest good" (1983). It takes us back to Smith's concept of holiness. Doore begins with theories that define religion in terms of worship. Doore finds fault with those definitions because they are highly biased towards Western theistic religions. They exclude Buddhism, and probably also exclude Taoism, Jainism, and some forms of Hinduism. Yet Doore correctly says all those things are religions.

Doore then argues that the core concept of religion lies near the concepts of liberation, salvation, and enlightenment. These are much more adequate than worship. To develop his core concept, Doore turns to Kant's *summum bonum* – the highest good. He investigates its role in religions like Christianity, as well as in the Eastern religions. He says the Kantian *summum bonum* plays a crucial role in all these religions, though he also believes that the Eastern concepts of the highest good are richer than the Kantian concept. If his work is correct, then the highest good is *religiously holy* in the *general* sense of holiness defined by Smith. But now Smith is wrong to say that the religiously holy involves any personality. The highest good need not be personally holy. Smith too was biased towards Western theisms in his definition of the religiously holy. But the highest good is *morally holy*. And this, of course, takes us back to Murdoch.

The highest good (as liberation, salvation, or enlightenment) is something we ought to try to obtain. Here Doore focuses on practices that religions offer as paths to that highest good. Worship may be one of those paths. But Doore focuses more on religious ways of life and spiritual practices (like meditation, yoga, tantra, and so on). He mentions the possibility of humanist religions. Perhaps he would include Stoic practices as religious in a humanistic sense. The ancient Platonists sought union with the Good through their meditative practices (and perhaps through more physical magical-theurgical practices). Several articles elsewhere in *Religious Studies* discuss Platonic religious practices or ways of life (Rosen, 1980; Arp, 2004; Clark, 2016). If, as Murdoch reminds us, the Good is not a god, then those Platonic practices are not worshipful. A Platonic atheist can indeed be religious in the sense of practically pursuing the highest good.

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