

# God and Cosmic Purpose

A Philosophical Reflection on Bishop & Perszyk's *God, Purpose, and Reality*

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## God but Not as We Know Her

During my Catholic upbringing I always found it difficult to make sense of the command to love God. According to Jesus, it's the first and greatest commandment, even more important than loving your neighbour. But how can I love a person I've never met over the people I know very well? Loving a person surely involves spending time with them, getting to know them, interacting on a personal basis. Other Christians tell me that they experience and interact with God. But from what I can make out, these experiences don't seem to be very much like the kinds of interactions I would describe as 'getting to know another person,' the kinds of things that seemed to me required for a loving *personal* relationship.

Don't get me wrong, I've had spiritual experiences. Not a full-blown mystical experience, but a sense of a greater reality at the root of things, what William James called "The More." These can be wonderful, sublime, transformative happenings, setting a moral and spiritual compass for the rest of life. Still, I don't feel inclined to describe them as 'getting to know' or 'loving' another person. How can I love an invisible person who I've never even had a conversation with?

In their rich and insightful book *God, Purpose and Reality*, John Bishop and Ken Perszyk defend what they call a 'euteleological understanding of theism.' What they describe in the book is a very different picture of God from the one I absorbed as a child. On Bishop and Perszyk's view, God is not a person; in fact, God is not any kind of entity at all. Rather, talk of 'God' is a way of referring to reality's essential directedness towards the good, what we might call 'cosmic purpose.'

In my own work, I have defended cosmic purpose as an *alternative* to God. The universe seems to me a strange cocktail of accident and design. Some things, such as psycho-physical harmony or the fine-tuning of physics for life, seem too improbably good to be accident, and yet there is also terrible tragedy and gratuitous suffering. Traditional atheists struggle to account for the former; traditional theists struggle to account for the latter. In my book *Why? The Purpose of the Universe*, I argue that cosmic purpose in the absence of God can account for both data-points.

In contrast, rather than seeing cosmic purpose as an alternative to God, Bishop and Perszyk want to *identify* cosmic purpose with God. They outline a way of making sense of the God of the Abrahamic faiths not as an anthropomorphic, invisible 'Super-Mind,' but rather as cosmic purpose itself. More precisely, although the term 'cosmic purpose' does not pick out an entity, talk of 'God' is a way of talking about cosmic purpose. They envisage euteleological theism as the optimal basis for Abrahamic worship. While there is no supernatural person who created the universe, the universe exists because of reality's essential directedness towards the good; in this sense, we can truly say that God created the world.

I wish my teachers at Sunday school had read Bishop and Perszyk's book. For one thing, it might have helped with my difficulties making sense of loving God. If God is nothing other than the directedness towards the good, then to love God is to love the directedness towards the good. That makes a lot more sense to me as the first commandment, much more so than an imperative to love an invisible person more than you love your mum. Maybe I wouldn't have ended up refusing to get confirmed at 14.

## The Problem of Evil

While I have some sympathies for Bishop and Perszyk's position, I don't find it entirely satisfactory. They promise that it will deal with the problem of evil. But the problem of evil euteleological theism addresses is a very specific – albeit very interesting – form of the general problem, which they call the 'normatively relativised' problem of evil. Most arguments from evil focus on the question of whether an all-loving, powerful person would have good moral reasons for creating the universe, with all the suffering we find in it. One way of defending God against arguments is to come up with a theodicy, offering possible reasons God might have had for allowing suffering. Another option is *skeptical theism*, which argues that we shouldn't expect to know God's reasons, and so the fact that we have no idea why God creates suffering gives us no grounds for thinking there is no good reason.

Suppose one of these theistic strategies is successful in showing that God has good moral reason to create the universe as we find it (or at least that we have no reason to think God didn't have a good reason). Still, a problem remains, according to Bishop and Perszyk, as to the suitability of God as an object of worship. Even if God had good reasons for killing and maiming, by creating a world containing deadly natural disasters, still, these acts of God arguably detract from the idea that God is a flawless, perfectly good being. God caused terrible things, even if on balance they were permissible or even necessary. According to Bishop and Perszyk, this constitutes a fatal blow to the *religious adequacy* of a personal God, by which they mean the capacity for this conception of God to make sense of religious practice. A God who causes terrible harm, even for good reasons, is not a God worthy of worship.

Let us try to think this through with an analogy. Suppose my wife is blackmailed by someone threatening to murder many people and forced to lie to me and manipulate for many years in order to stop the threat being carried out. My wife had good moral reasons for her harmful actions towards me. Nonetheless, it may not be possible to repair our relationship after years of one party deliberately harming the other. Likewise, according to Bishop and Perszyk, a loving worshipful relationship with a personal God who hurts you badly is not possible. Their solution is to deny that God is a person.

I'm not sure how convincing I find this argument. Being a good person is a matter of doing what is right, even if what is right regrettably causes harm. Indeed, this can make a person *more* admirable that they do the terrible thing that needs to be done in spite of the difficulty. So if God really did have good reasons for causing suffering, then it's not clear to me it does detract from her flawless goodness. Whilst it would obviously be challenging to forgive and repair my marital relationship in the scenario outlined above, it seems to me that if my wife had genuinely done what she did to save lives, and felt extreme and appropriate regret at the necessary harm caused to me, then I think – if possible – repairing the relationship would be the right thing to do. Bishop and Perszyk make clear that their focus is more than merely the pastoral issue of the *practical difficulty* of loving and worshipping a God who has caused you suffering. They are rather focusing on whether it is *right* to be in relationship with, and to worship, a God who causes harm (even for good reason). I'm not convinced that there is a third problem of evil, in between the evidential problem of whether suffering counts against God's existence and the pastoral problem of the pragmatic difficulty of worshipping a God that causes suffering.

Moreover, Bishop and Perszyk face their own version of the evidential problem of evil. On their view, reality is directed towards the good, and the universe itself exists in order to realise the ultimate good. In that case, why do bad things happen? To answer this question, Bishop and Perszyk create a euteleological 'theodicy,' attempting to reconcile the terrible suffering we find in the world with the putative fact that the universe exists for the sake of the ultimate good. Of course, their 'theodicy' is

not literally an account of possible reasons a supernatural creator might have had for creating the world as it is, as Bishop and Perszyk reject the existence of a personal creator, but it resembles familiar theodicies which do attempt to do this.

They say, for example, that ‘the supreme good requires for its concrete instantiation a process in which levels of concrete complexity emerge that have the capacity to instantiate it.’ (p. 149) This is not so obvious to me. If the universe is heading somewhere good, why not cut to the chase and avoid all the suffering of a long-winded process? Bishop and Perzyk work with the Christian idea of *agapé*-love as the ultimate goal of existence. But it seems metaphysically possible for personal beings to emerge spontaneously rather than being the end-product of a lengthy and painful developmental process, and the latter possible world would seem to be better than the former. If the ultimate causal principle of reality serves the ultimate good, surely we’d expect that principle to have selected a world with less pain?

Perhaps there is some benefit to there being a developmental process, in which creatures learn and evolve. But does that process need to be as brutal as natural selection? John Hawthorne and Daniel Nolan (2006) have developed a detailed account of teleological laws: laws with purposes built into them. It seems metaphysically possible that evolution might have been driven by teleological laws which ensured a gentle process of development rather than by the harsh mistress of survival of the fittest.

Bishop and Perszyk explain some of the suffering we find in terms of the operation of uniform laws of nature, which they suggest may be required ‘for the eventual evolution of beings capable of realizing the supreme good’ (p. 149). In so far as we live in a universe with mechanical laws relentlessly powering on irrespective of their impact on sentient beings, it seems likely that such laws will have a detrimental impact on sentient being at least some of the time. However, whilst such exceptionless laws may be required for evolution by natural selection, they don’t seem to be required for evolution guided by teleological laws.

Bishop and Perszyk also appeal to free will as part of the explanation of evil. This has always seemed to me the most plausible theodicy. But, of course, it has limited scope, at best able to deal only with the suffering caused by human beings. Alvin Plantinga (1977) has notoriously considered appealing to the free will of demons to explain natural evil. In the spirit of giving free reign to wild speculations, to my mind a slightly more plausible way of extended the free will theodicy would be to posit a pre-birth realm, in which as spiritual creatures we somehow chose or warranted our current, less than ideal form of existence. But both options add great complexity to our picture of reality, and thus would detract from the plausibility of euteleological theism.

### **Impure Euteleological Theism**

Given the above, does the problem of evil cast doubt on euteleological theism? I think it casts doubt on what we might call *pure* euteleological theism, according to which the *sole* reason the universe exists is to realise the ultimate good. But we might also imagine an impure euteleological theism, on which the directedness of reality towards the good is *part* of the explanation of why the universe exists. There are at least three ways this could be spelt out:

- *Split-directedness* – Reality is inherently directed towards two different goals. Perhaps the universe is partly directed towards the good and partly towards the bad, the non-personal analogue of Manichaeism. Or perhaps the ‘second’ directedness is towards something of positive value, but in such a way that there is no sensitivity to how achieving that value impacts the goal of achieving the ultimate good, e.g. the second aim may be to bring about

mathematically beautiful laws without a concern for the suffering such laws may sometimes bring about.<sup>1</sup>

- *Partially-brute* – Some fundamental aspects of the universe can be explained in terms of the directedness of reality towards the good, but other fundamental aspects of the universe are brute facts, not admitting of deeper explanation.
- *Limited-Directedness* – Reality's only aim is to realise the ultimate good, but this directedness is limited in how it is able to realise its aims. This is the analogue of the 'Limited designer' hypothesis I consider in *Why? The Purpose of the Universe*.

A fully worked-out form of split-directedness would need to specify the division of labour between reality's two aims, in such a way that an explanation of the empirical facts falls out. I have no idea how one would do that in a way that doesn't look ad hoc. The latter two explanations both introduce extra bruteness relative to pure euteleological theism. Partially-Brute takes certain fundamental aspects of contingent reality as brute; Limited-Directedness takes as brute the limitations of the directedness towards the good. However, Limited-Directedness is a more unified explanation than Partially-Brute: on the former the brute aspect of reality is intimately related to the teleological aspect, whilst on the latter, they have nothing to do with each other.

I conclude therefore that Limited-Directedness is the best form of impure euteleological theism. I believe it to be superior to pure euteleological theism on the basis of its capacity to avoid the problem of evil.

Is Limited-Directedness *religiously adequate*, in the sense of being a possible way in which a person of Abrahamic faith could understand God (the central aim of *God, Purpose, and Reality*)? One might worry that we lose the crucial idea that God is the foundation of all of reality, given that we have introduced an element of bruteness into the picture. However, these limitations are not something extra to God but rather an essential feature of God, and in that sense there's nothing other than God at the foundation of reality.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, there are Christian process theists who think that God has limited powers, the personal analogue of Limited Directedness.

I'm not sure whether or not Limited-Directedness fits within the Abrahamic tradition. But for Christians, Muslims and Jews who find it distasteful to worship a Super-Person, it might be worth thinking about.

### **To Be or Not To Be: Is that the Question?**

One final concern I have with euteleological theism is whether it can be specified without reference to an entity. There is enough in this book to worry analytic theists, we surely don't want to commit the additional heresy of going against Quine's dictum that to be is to be the value of a bound variable. In this case, to describe euteleological theism as 'the directedness of reality towards such and such' is to commit to the existence of an entity referred to by the term 'reality.' But if there is such an entity which bears fundamental directedness towards the good, it would be natural to take it to be the referent of the word 'God' And yet according to euteleological theism is no such entity as God. I would welcome any guidance as to how to state the core doctrine of euteleological theism without referring to an entity.

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<sup>1</sup> There could be teleological laws aiming at something of value nor disvalue. However, it's not clear what advantage this would have over Partially-Brute.

<sup>2</sup> I'm speaking loosely, as God is not an entity at all for a euteleological theist. The point is we could give an exhaustive explanation of why the universe exists in terms of the fact that reality is directed towards the good but is limited in how it is able to achieve that good.

## References

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