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978-1-107-02357-4 - The Severity of God: Religion and Philosophy Reconciled

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Excerpt

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Introduction

Christianity can falsely be made so severe that human nature must revolt against it ... But Christianity can also be made so lenient or flavored with sweetness that all the attempts to perk up the appetite and give people a taste for it with demonstrations and reasons are futile and end up making people disgusted with it.

(Kierkegaard 1851a, p. 203)

Certainly no presentation of the Christian message today is likely to be of the least avail which does not hold firmly together both the goodness and the severity of God.

(Farmer 1939, p. 112)

Christianity and theology aside, human life is severe in many ways, and, adding injury to insult, human death is no easier. Candor requires that we acknowledge as much, even though we humans seem to be unable to improve our predicament in any lasting way. If some children are sheltered from life's severity for a time, reality eventually intrudes, painfully and undeniably. This intrusion prompts humans to undertake all kinds of conduct for the sake of self-defense or at least temporary relief. Psychologists talk of human "coping mechanisms" and "diversionary tactics" in this connection.

Many people fold in the face of life's severity and settle for a kind of despair or hopelessness about human life. Bertrand Russell, for

instance, recommended that a human life should be based “only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair” (1903, pp. 45–46). (It is doubtful that Russell was able to follow his own recommendation, given his aim to “instill faith in hours of despair,” but that is a separate matter.) This book contends that life’s severity does not underwrite a life of unyielding despair.

If *successful* coping requires neutralizing a problem, we evidently have unsuccessful coping in our *self*-management of life’s severity. The severity persists despite the best human counter-efforts, and it resists being moderated in many cases. Self-medicating with nonprescription drugs, for instance, does not always neutralize our stress, even if it gets us through a night or two. In addition, if our source of self-medicating is addictive or otherwise destructive, we may end up worse off than when we began. At any rate, we should ask what, if anything, is the best response to the severity of human life. The answer depends, of course, on the nature of this severity.

SEVERITY

Severity can consist of a kind of stress or rigor that is free of evil but is nonetheless rigorously difficult for humans. For instance, not all stress in physical hunger or rigor in bodily exercise is evil in a morally relevant sense, but such stress can be severe indeed, owing to its rigorous difficulty for humans. It should go without saying that some evil is severe, even if severity does not entail evil. Despite voluminous discussion of logical and epistemological problems of evil, philosophers and theologians have given scarce attention to the problem of the severity of human life. In fact, no philosopher has offered a book-length work on severity regarding humans and God.

This book corrects for that deficiency in a manner that illuminates some important problems in the philosophy of religion. It attends to severity on both sides of the God–human relationship: severity as caused or at least allowed by God, and severity as experienced by humans.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd edn., 1989) offers this main definition of “severity”: “strictness or sternness in dealing with others; stern or rigorous disposition or behaviour; rigour in treatment, discipline, punishment, or the like.” This definition does *not* entail moral badness or evil, or any moral deficiency for that matter, contrary to some less prominent uses of “severity.” The severity in question, however, does involve rigorous difficulty, discomfort, anxiety, stress, or insecurity for humans.

This book’s problem, put broadly, is this: what sense, if any, can we make of the severity of human life? The desired “sense” would illuminate not only the nature of life’s severity but also its value and its purposes, if it actually has value and purposes. This book contends that it does have underlying value and purposes and that this fact has significant implications for religion and philosophy and, more concretely, for the option of unyielding despair about human life. The relevant purposes, however, need not be transparent to all observers but can be “hidden” or “elusive,” in a manner to be specified. What is true, for better or worse, need not be obviously true to everyone.

Some people will invoke God as an ultimate source to explain or otherwise to resolve at least some of life’s severity. Other people will counter that an appeal to God in this connection is at best presumptuous and at worst misleading. Even so, this appeal may have some hope if inquirers have outside help, particularly divine help, as a source of information and other aid. This is a big

“if,” of course, but we cannot plausibly rule out this option at the start of inquiry, whatever we do with it later. This book gives this option a fair hearing, without any dogmatic favor or disfavor. In connection with (a notion of) God, the problem of divine severity becomes the problem of whether – and if so, why – a God worthy of worship would allow human life to be as severe or rigorously difficult as it actually is, at least at times. One might expect a God who vigorously cares for humans to blunt some of the severity faced by them and even more of the severity than is actually blunted in human life.

The book tries to make headway on the problem of severity by examining the distinctive character and purposes of a God worthy of worship. If this God seeks what is morally best for all people concerned, and not just a select few, then God may have definite redemptive purposes for human severity of various kinds. These purposes could go beyond supplying information to God’s seeking profound transformation for humans, for the sake of human participation in God’s perfect moral character. If this participation is part of what is morally best for humans, God could seek it even if severity, including divine severity, intrudes in human life. Severity would be part of the healing medicine prescribed for a human life in need of divine companionship and transformation toward God’s moral character and will. We shall examine this proposal from several illuminating angles.

Many people, including philosophers, have misguided expectations for God. These expectations are misguided in their failing to match what would be God’s relevant purposes, if God exists. The latter purposes include what God aims to achieve in revealing to humans (the evidence of) God’s reality and will. Misguided expectations for God can leave one looking for evidence for God in all the wrong places. In failing to find the expected evidence, one easily

lapses into despair, anger, or indifference toward matters of God. We find such regrettable attitudes among many people, including philosophers and theologians.

The needed antidote calls for a careful reconsideration of our expectations for God. This antidote enables us to approach religious epistemology in a way that does justice to the idea of a God worthy of worship. As we shall see, the evidence available to humans from a God worthy of worship would not be for mere spectators, but instead would seek to challenge the will of humans to cooperate with God's perfect will. This would result from God's seeking what is morally best for humans, including (a) their cooperative reconciliation to God, (b) their redemption from volitional corruption, such as selfishness, pride, and despair about human life, and (c) their ongoing cooperative life with God.

What if, as Kierkegaard (1846) suggested, God maintains God's value by refusing to become a mere third party and instead offering second-person (I–Thou) access to humans? What if, in addition, God is elusive in hiding from people unwilling to cooperate with God's will? Such “what if” questions can shake up misguided expectations for God and point us in a new, reliable direction. This book identifies that direction by acknowledging (a) the role of divine severity in the intended redemption of humans and, in our response, (b) the importance of human volitional cooperation with God, even when rigorous and unsettling.

PLANS

Characterized broadly, this book explores the role of divine severity in the following important areas: (a) the character and wisdom of God (Chapter 1); (b) the flux and struggle in human life (Chapter 2);

(c) the place of evidence, miracles, and arguments in human access to God (Chapter 3); (d) the divine salvation of humans (Chapter 4); and (e) the function of philosophy in approaching God (Chapter 5). These areas offer us an opportunity to clarify the character and purposes of divine severity via some outstanding problems in religion and philosophy. In fact, we shall see that divine severity prompts us to reconceive religion and philosophy in connection with these areas.

The book's unifying theme is that the kind of divine severity found in the volitional crisis of Gethsemane calls for reconceiving various problem areas in religion and philosophy. The reconceiving includes an intentional refocus from merely intellectual matters to existentially profound volitional matters in human priority relations to a severe God worthy of worship. Questions about human wills relative to God emerge as crucial in this reorientation. Religion and philosophy will look very different from this new perspective.

Chapter 1, "Severity and God," identifies how the moral character and will of a God worthy of worship would involve divine severity. In particular, it acknowledges that worthiness of worship requires moral perfection and that divine moral perfection demands that God seek to be redemptive toward all human candidates for redemption. It would not be adequate for God merely to want the redemption of humans. For the sake of moral perfection, God would have to do God's best to bring about human redemption for all genuine candidates. Because this would be the redemption of human *agents*, with their own wills, God would not be coercive in a manner that extinguishes or deactivates human wills. As a result, God's use of severity in human life to prompt redemption might not be a complete success story. Humans can resist, even stubbornly

resist, redemption on God's terms, and some apparently do. Nothing necessitates that humans cooperate with God. Chapter 1 outlines how divine wisdom and severity figure in this predicament, and it portrays how human expectations of God can obscure the reality and purposes of God for humans. In addition, it offers a straightforward method to avoid the latter problem.

Chapter 2, "Severity and flux," asks how the flux, or impermanence, of this passing world bears on a case for a God worthy of worship. It contends that the bearing is positive rather than negative, given the redemptive character and aims of a God worthy of worship. It proposes that a severe *agapē* struggle involving humans and God is an elusive indicator of permanence in connection with this God. Philosophers of religion have neglected this important lesson, often as a result of looking for permanence in the wrong places. Chapter 2 identifies the upshot of this lesson for available human evidence of God. It offers a rather broad vision of such evidence that conforms to some important expectation-evoking questions regarding God's existence. Such a vision opens up some new prospects in the philosophy of religion by clarifying some key purposes behind divine severity, including the divine purpose of the volitional transformation of humans.

Chapter 3, "Severity and evidence," contends that a God worthy of worship would care about how a human fills in the following blank: "I inquire or believe regarding God's existence because I want ———." The chapter begins by asking what human motives we should expect God to want in human inquiry and belief regarding God. Resting on an expectation-evoking question regarding God's existence, this approach is widely neglected among philosophers, theologians, and others, but it

can illuminate some important issues concerning divine severity and religious epistemology. Chapter 3 explains how this approach identifies the key shortcomings of the arguments of traditional natural theology. It indicates that such arguments fail to accommodate the motives that God, as worthy of worship, would want in human inquiry and belief regarding God. Chapter 3 also contends that we should not expect a God worthy of worship to supply observable miracles to humans on demand, because divine redemption would aim for the profound moral transformation of humans independent of such miracles. In other words, the severity of divine grace in human redemption has no absolute need for such miracles among humans. The chapter contends that we should formulate our expectations of God accordingly.

Chapter 4, “Severity and salvation,” argues that a defensible approach to salvation by divine “grace,” including divine redemptive severity, requires an active, cooperative role for humans in their salvation. Identifying this active role, the chapter elucidates the indispensability of human accountability and cooperation in the realization of human salvation, and it suggests that this contributes to an understanding of divine severity in human salvation. Chapter 4 clarifies this active role via a distinction between (a) an action that either *constitutes* or *earns* salvation and (b) an action that *receives* already constituted salvation. The chapter illuminates the nature of divinely reckoned righteousness to humans via human faith that is active in the salvation involving the human reception of divine power. It contends that the severity of worthiness of worship calls for such distinctive righteousness among humans but blocks any role for human self-righteousness or humanly earned salvation.

Chapter 5, “Severity and philosophy,” assumes that divine severity is a morally loaded sifting project in human redemption by a God worthy of worship who refuses to extinguish human agency. This severity involves divine sifting with regard to human receptivity toward divine grace anchored in a gift of righteousness as cooperative life with God for amenable humans. As personified in Jesus Christ, this grace seeks to inhabit human lives as their forgiving Lord and transformative Sustainer. Chapter 5 contends that this inhabiting comes via a rigorous kind of human receptivity, specifically via a union in divine *agapē* whereby one dies and rises with Christ into a self-sacrificial life with a severe God worthy of worship. It finds, accordingly, the distinctive focus of Christian philosophy in the redemptive *power* of God in Christ, available in the severity of human experience and life. This power transcends philosophical wisdom by delivering the causally powerful Spirit of God, who intervenes with a goal of divine corrective reciprocity. The chapter indicates that this power yields a distinctive religious epistemology and even a special role for Christian spirituality in Christian philosophy. It also challenges an influential counter from philosophical atheism.

Overall, the book’s lesson is that only a severe God would be worthy of worship, but such a God would be severely redemptive and thus vigorously transformative in a manner that overturns business as usual in religion, theology, philosophy, and related disciplines. The remaining question is whether humans are truly receptive to this divine solution to their rigorous predicament. Answers will vary among humans, of course, but this book contends that we should acknowledge the crucial human responsibility in this area of inquiry. We shall see, in the end, how human inquirers are themselves under vigorous divine inquiry in this vital area, whatever

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their actual expectations of God. Inquirers of God, then, become themselves a focus of morally relevant divine inquiry and therefore have no exemption from accountability before the severe God who is worthy of worship. We shall see how religion and philosophy look from this new perspective.