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The God Relationship: Basics and Plans

We humans ask questions, if we do anything. Our questions seem to know no bounds, ranging from the trivial to the familiar to the profound. Some of our questions arise self-consciously, and others persist subconsciously, at times with some torment for us. In either case, however, we humans engage in inquiry, even when answers are elusive or unavailable. Our questions can reveal our true priorities, regardless of whether we are aware of our motives for inquiry. Our motives are, in part, reality-seeking and thus truth-seeking, or at least *answer*-seeking, because answers can serve various theoretical and practical purposes for us. An answer to a biological question, for instance, can bring us important truth about biological reality, and an answer to a scheduling question can enhance the realization of our meeting plans.

We shall see that some long-standing questions about God take on new significance when we attend to what is *fitting* for our inquiry about God, relative to what would be God's unique *moral* character and purposes for humans. The book thus introduces and develops the *ethics* for inquiry about God, and identifies the results for some long-standing questions about God. Such ethics will not be ethics as usual if it is ethics for inquiry about a being who has a morally perfect character. In that case, it will need to be suitably attentive to the unique moral character under inquiry, and it will have significant implications for the intentions and conduct of the people undertaking the inquiry.

The relevant ethics for inquiry will be an ethics for actively pursuing what would be not only true or justified but also good in inquiry about God. It will be an ethics for *responsible* inquiry regarding God's reality and goodness, and the responsibility will be defined by the nature of what the inquiry concerns, that is, the nature of the subject-matter of the inquiry. It would be question-begging now to define "responsibility" in terms of responsiveness *to God* (as, for instance, in H. Richard Niebuhr 1963), because a key part of the inquiry is *whether* God exists. I aim to avoid begging key questions against agnostics about God, because that practice would gain nothing now.

We may think of responsible inquiry about God as one's *doing the best one can* in the process and not just the result (such as a true object) of the inquiry, in a manner respectful of its subject-matter. So, an inquirer about God would not be responsible in introducing requirements that exclude God's existence at the start (assuming that the relevant notion of God is internally coherent). Introducing such requirements would make for defective, irresponsible inquiry, when one could do better. For instance, we should not exclude at the start the prospect that God is inherently redemptive toward interpersonal relationships with humans. So, responsible inquiry should allow that God seeks, above all, interpersonal relationships of sympathetic cooperation from humans, and supports faith, evidence, knowledge, wisdom, and meaning regarding God in the context of such cooperative relationships.

The ethics for inquiry about God will bear on whether an inquirer has put himself or herself in a responsible position to receive salient evidence, and perhaps other benefits, from the morally perfect God in question. (Chapter 2 offers some ethical principles for inquiry about God.) We may proceed with the following meaning of "salient" from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition: "standing out or prominent in consciousness." One's salient evidence, then, is definite in a way that avoids the kind of ambiguity or vagueness

requiring one to withhold judgment about what the evidence indicates. A key goal of responsible inquiry about God is to test for such evidence in a manner that amounts to one's best effort. So, the position of the inquirer, including the inquirer's intentions and actions, can be directly relevant, because that position can bear on one's receptivity (or the lack thereof) to pertinent evidence of divine reality. For instance, whether one receives salient evidence of God's self-manifested reality could depend on whether God makes that evidence salient to one, and whether God makes it salient to one could depend on what one intends to value (or not value) regarding God's reality and perfect goodness.

The book's main questions include: Is God real? If so, *which* God? Would God, if perfectly good, seek an ongoing *personal relationship* with a human, and not just discrete experiences, thoughts, feelings, or actions in a human? If so, what would that relationship include, and what would be its benefits for a human? In addition, if God does seek an ongoing personal relationship, what would the corresponding salient evidence of God's reality look like, and how could a human appropriate it? Why, in any case, is God's reality obscure at best to many people? Is there any way to remove this obscurity, or at least to accommodate it given the problem of evil facing God's existence and goodness? How *should* one inquire about God, in keeping with God's perfectly good moral character, if one aims to have true and justified belief regarding God's reality and goodness? Does the relevant inquiry about God, furthermore, bear on the value or purpose of human life? An ethics for inquiry about God will emerge from our investigation, despite the widespread neglect of such ethics by inquirers.

1. MODES OF INQUIRY

We use different *modes of inquiry* in our quest to find answers to our questions, if unknowingly at times. A mode of inquiry is, put broadly, a way of seeking a correct or a

justified answer to a question. Such a mode can be – to name just three options – mathematical, scientific, or interpersonal. A mode of inquiry needs to be suited to identifying the kind of content or subject-matter involved in a question. Otherwise, it will be a questionable, if not irresponsible, way of approaching the question. For instance, we cannot rely solely on mathematical derivation to answer scientific questions in organic or inorganic chemistry. As a result, mathematics does not supersede inquiry in organic or inorganic chemistry, even when it accompanies and organizes such chemistry.

A mathematics teacher might raise a question about the relation between the lengths of the sides of a right triangle by using part of the Pythagorean equation: $a^2 + b^2 = ?$ ("a" and "b" representing the sides other than the hypotenuse). A mode of inquiry in this case could be *purely mathematical*, consisting only of thinking about and organizing the (conceptual and propositional) mathematical content needed to derive the Pythagorean Theorem, in equation form: $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$. In that case, the mode of inquiry would be non-empirical, or *a priori.* This mathematical mode of inquiry would not require one to be engaged beyond one's handling relevant mathematical content, and this makes the mode purely mathematical, even if one draws logical inferences in one's mathematical thinking. (I thus use "mathematical" broadly to allow for the inclusion of logical inferences.)

A mode of inquiry can entertain sensory content, such as qualitative content from perception. In that case, the mode of inquiry would be empirical, at least in part, and not purely *a priori*. For instance, a chemistry teacher might raise a question about the (degree of) solubility of sodium chloride in water. In that case, a typical mode of inquiry would mix sodium chloride with water under conditions of stirring, and then measure the result as a ratio of dissolved sodium to added water. This would be an *empirical* mode of inquiry that attends to sensory content in the inquirer's

perceptual experience. It also would be *scientific* in virtue of following an experimental procedure characteristic of one of the natural sciences, in this case, chemistry. (This point does not depend on a controversial claim that all science is experimental; it allows that parts of astrophysics and cosmology, for instance, may not be. We also should allow that an empirical mode of inquiry need not be strictly scientific.) The relevant procedure in chemistry would attend to sensory content and corresponding content-relations, but it would not attend at all to a personal agent (as a personal agent) in its content or subject-matter. This is typical of a scientific mode of inquiry in the natural sciences.

In contrast with a purely mathematical or scientific mode, an *interpersonal* mode of inquiry requires interaction with a personal agent, an agent with a *will* and its corresponding *intentions*. Neither the objects of mathematics nor the objects of chemistry require interpersonal interaction in inquiry. They do not include a personal will or its intentions represented in their content or subject-matter. So, they do not provide in their content an opportunity for volitional cooperation with their objects in human inquiry.

Someone, in search of a correct answer, might ask me: Are you my companion? In response, I would do well not to turn to mathematics or chemistry to find a correct answer. Instead, I would need to attend to interpersonal interaction whereby I come (or came) to *know the person* asking the question. I may need to discern how that person aims to live her life, and then to relate this finding to how I intend to live my life. An important question for me would be whether our life-plans allow for something needed for companionship: *interpersonal cooperation*. Neither mathematics nor chemistry would settle that question for me. I would need to inquire via interpersonal interaction and attention to an opportunity for interpersonal cooperation.

For the sake of acquiring true belief and justified belief, inquiry about God should begin with an acknowledgment of the variability in modes of inquiry. It thereby

will avoid any misleading assumption that reduces all inquiry to a mathematical mode or a scientific mode, for instance. Otherwise, we will risk obstructing our acquiring relevant evidence in our inquiry. If God is a personal agent with definite purposes in supplying evidence of divine reality to humans, these purposes will bear on the fittingness of a mode of inquiry about God's reality. We should consider that God, if real, would be perfectly good, by a moral standard, and thus would seek what is best (all things considered) for humans. In that case, we may suppose that God would not settle for isolated or episodic human experiences, thoughts, feelings, or actions regarding God. Instead, God would seek an enduring personal relationship with humans for their benefit; otherwise, God would be morally deficient in neglecting something good in interpersonal matters. We may call this *the God relationship* with humans and ask how it would bear on our inquiry about God.

The God relationship would be an enduring dispositional state irreducible to discrete experiences, thoughts, feelings, or actions. So, a person could be in such a state while asleep, without any acting or thinking. For instance, one could be in a relationship of faith in God while not thinking of God at all, even if a discrete episode of trust launched one's state of faith in God. The God relationship does require a kind of commitment, as we shall see, but the commitment does not require constant experience, thought, or feeling regarding God. This is important because it allows for reasonable, well-founded commitment to God in the absence of a present experience, thought, or feeling regarding God. So, one's not having a present experience, thought, or feeling regarding God will not undermine a well-founded God relationship.

A key question concerns what the God relationship (if real) would include. If God would be perfectly good, in being worthy of worship, then God would be perfectly loving toward all other agents, including God's enemies.

God's being thus loving would require that God seek what is best (all things considered) for all people. This would require that God seek what enables humans to flourish together in community, given that humans depend on each other for many vital benefits. The kind of love in question would be unselfish, other-regarding, and good-seeking, and thus may be called *agapē*, in keeping with a New Testament Greek term for "love." It requires caring without moral deficiency for (the overall good of) others, in contrast with selfishness toward other people.

The divine goal would be to have mutual *agapē* relationships between God and every human and between all humans who interact, for the benefit of all concerned. Let's call such *agapē*-centered relationships *koinonia* relationships. The ancient Greek term *koinonia* connotes such morally significant interpersonal features as the following: cooperation, amity, harmony, peace, fellowship, sincere communication, kindness, mercy, empathy, and sympathy as compassion, in a good relationship. We thus will use this term to capture the heart of an *agapē* relationship. The ethics of inquiry about God would offer a human the prospect of an ethical struggle for *koinonia* with God's perfectly good moral character.

The divine goal, if God exists, would be for humans to imitate God's moral character in personal *koinonia* relationships. In Latin, this goal is known as *imitatio Dei*, and it emerges recurringly in Jewish and Christian monotheism. (Islam typically avoids talk of the *imitatio Dei*, to avoid undue human affinity to God, but it endorses human guidance by God's moral character, particularly by divine mercy.) The Jewish Bible includes the following command: "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2; I use the NRSV here and in subsequent biblical translations, unless otherwise noted). Similarly: "I am the Lord who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:45;

cf. Lev. 20:26). The holiness thus commanded includes at least moral righteousness, in contrast to the immoral practices, such as the sacrificing of children, found in some surrounding cultures. (I use biblical passages when they offer explanatory benefits, without assuming the infallibility, inerrancy, or authority of the Bible as a whole.)

The New Testament ascribes to Jesus a command to imitate God's moral character. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus teaches: "Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:35–36). Similarly, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus announces: "I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. . . . Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:44–45, 48; cf. Eph. 5:1, 1 Pet. 1:15–16, 1 John 4:11). The central idea here concerns *moral* perfection or completeness, given the emphasis on the love of one's enemies. God sets the moral standard, and humans are to follow suit, in direct imitation of God's moral character, particularly divine *agapē*.

Søren Kierkegaard speaks of the *imitatio Dei* in connection with the New Testament love commandment as "*the Christian like for like, eternity's like for like*" (1847, p. 376). This "like for like" is an important part of what he calls "the God relationship." He highlights that relationship through his pseudonym, Johannes Climacus: "The God relationship of the individual human being is the main point" (1846, p. 77). He also sets a standard for this relationship to be I–Thou in orientation, involving God in the second person relative to a human. He states: "God can never become a third party when he is a part of the religious; this is precisely the secret of the religious" (1846, p. 66). In becoming a "third party," God would be omitted from standing in an

I–Thou relationship with humans and thus would stand outside a directly interpersonal relationship.

Kierkegaard has in mind a relationship that can be morally and psychologically demanding. He remarks: "Worship is the maximum for a human being's relationship with God, and thereby for his likeness to God" (1846, p. 413). In Kierkegaard's perspective, God can, and does, maintain high standards, including high moral standards, for the God relationship: "God . . . is certainly one who is allowed to attach importance to his person, and therefore he is not constrained to reduce the price of the God relationship because of a religious slackness" (1846, p. 231). (For discussion of Kierkegaard on the God relationship, see Walsh 2009, Torrance 2016.)

Kierkegaard holds that our inquiry about God should attend to the God relationship available to us, in contrast with God's reality apart from us (1846, p. 199). He has Climacus state the following: "The relationship with God has only one evidence, the relationship with God itself; everything else is equivocal" (1846, p. 446). Given divine moral perfection, a person's relationship (or lack thereof) to God will be *morally* implicated in inquiry about God, if God exists, as that person is challenged to meet, personally and interpersonally, the moral expectations of God. This book will identify how we are morally implicated and challenged if the God relationship is indeed on offer to humans. We thus shall attend to how humans would have to appropriate relevant evidence of a morally perfect God, with special attention to responsible human inquiry about God.

We can appreciate a need for a distinctive mode of inquiry regarding God if we acknowledge the following: God would be *sui generis*, at least regarding moral character, and would want inquirers not just to know that something is true (about God), but to enter into a *koinonia* relationship with God that includes *imitatio Dei*. So, inquiry about God, if a morally perfect God exists, would become

morally existential, because the "how," particularly the moral process, of getting the truth about God would matter crucially. Such existential inquiry would directly engage one's will and affections, not just one's thinking, because it would engage *how one loves* what or whom one loves.

If God is *sui generis*, at least regarding moral character, God may need to be *self-authenticating* toward humans, with *God* ultimately confirming God's reality. This could include God's supplying the ultimate epistemic standard for God's reality by personal example in self-manifestation (*de re*, in a sense to be clarified) of God's moral character to humans over time. It also could include a divine effort to replace among humans any epistemic standards that obscure the ultimate evidence of divine reality in God's self-manifested moral character.

In a case of my will's being engaged, I could have experiential content of feeling challenged, and even convicted, by another person to replace my selfish ways, including my selfish willing, with unselfish love toward others. The person offering the challenge might want to keep this challenge confidential, just between the two of us, perhaps in order to discourage my blaming others for my selfishness. So, this person might not display to others his challenge to me, and I need not be able to reproduce for others his challenge to me in its original form. The original challenge to me comes from another person, after all, and not from me, and it could be for the good of all concerned. I therefore could have experiential content regarding such a challenge to me, such as felt uncoercive pressure on my will toward unselfish love, even if that content would not be agreed upon by persons other than me and the source of the challenge. Responsible inquiry about God should be sensitive to a consideration of this kind, because it suggests a potential need for an interpersonal mode of inquiry different from a mathematical or scientific mode of inquiry. The intended analogy includes God's aiming to have one willingly convicted in conscience by God's self-manifested