

“Saving God from *Saving God*”

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Mark Johnston’s book, *Saving God* (Princeton University Press, 2010) has two main goals, one negative and the other positive. Each goal is ambitious, to say the least. He is engaged in something very like “perfect being theology”: define God as the Greatest Possible Being, or the most perfect being; argue about what attributes are perfections, or make for greatness; and arrive at a substantive thesis about what God is like (or would have to be like, if there were such a being). Although Mark’s title for God, “the Highest One”, is not straightforwardly defined as “the Greatest Possible Being”; nevertheless, the Highest One (or “H. O.”) is certainly intended to be the greatest being that actually exists, and the H. O. must also satisfy certain other (largely negative) constraints (e.g., such a being couldn’t be unjust, and couldn’t act unreasonably); it may also be part of Mark’s conception of the H. O. that it must provide some means to battle our perverse (“fallen”) inclinations.

The book’s two main goals are:

1. To eliminate the Old Gods of the major Western monotheisms (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) as candidates for the H. O.
2. To introduce the *real* H. O., a panentheistic deity worthy of devotion and capable of extending to us the grace needed to transform us from inwardly-turned sinners to practitioners of *agape*.

In this review, I consider the extent to which Mark's book achieves these goals.

Elimination of the Old Gods

Mark has two lines of attack against the Old Gods of Western theism. First, he finds criteria for being the H. O. that will disqualify the God described in Hebrew scriptures and the Koran. He makes use of criteria that are either internal to actual monotheistic traditions, or that can be delivered by what he calls "substantive reasonableness". The God of the scriptures is condemned out of his own mouth, and also by the pure light of reason.

Here, I don't see a significant departure from the methods of the "undergraduate atheists" (Mark's term for such popular, strident critics of theism as Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris; see pp. 37-39), except in his more measured tone. The genocidal and other unpleasant passages of the Torah, Psalms, and Prophets are trotted out (Ch. 4). And Mark judges that a God worthy of devotion, and a candidate for H. O., could not really behave in some of the ways described in these passages, or be driven by some of the ignoble motives apparently ascribed to Yahweh by the authors. Mark argues, credibly, that criteria internal to Western theism would disqualify a being with these attributes from being worthy of worship. Mark also argues — again, credibly — that the sweet light of "substantive reasonableness" cannot play upon the visage of a petulant, envious, and capricious deity and allow us to see him as the high holy one.

What this means, of course, is that for thousands of years there have been forces at work within the Abrahamic traditions themselves that have pressured their adherents toward re-interpretation or outright rejection of some of these portrayals of God. Respectable interpretative traditions within all three main forms of Western monotheism have sought ways to explain away the darker aspects of Yahweh. According to many within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, there is such a thing as theological development; the true character of God only gradually emerges over the

course of the long history of his dealings with us. But these efforts receive little attention in *Saving God*.

Christianity is in a particularly good position to respond to Mark's attack upon Yahweh, since Christ is, for Mark, the paradigmatic proponent of an ethic of utterly selfless love, an ideal that Mark himself affirms. Christ claims that God loves us with exactly this sort of love, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. Something must be done, then, about the ancient scriptural attributions of what seem to be less-than-*agapeistic* attitudes to God. That much is clear to Christian theologian and reflective lay-person alike; we did not need a litany of problem passages from Mark or the "undergraduate atheists" to bring the problem to our attention. The real question is: How credible are the results when theologians have attempted to read the "Old Testament" in light of the "New"? Serious attempts to grapple with the glaringly difficult passages might leave the Christian revelation in a difficult spot — it might seem stuck affirming the basic validity of the "Old Covenant", while denying the reliability of its founding texts. I do not think things are so bad as all that. There are plenty of Christian readings of the Hebrew scriptures that display sensitivity to Mark's worries; but there is little direct criticism of these efforts in *Saving God*. That may be forgivable in a book that is avowedly not a piece of "academic theology" or even a work of philosophy, but a "jeremiad", an "expression of a certain sensibility" (p. x). It does, however, mean that this part of his criticism adds little to the very similar points made by the "undergraduate atheists".

The second prong of Mark's attack upon the major Western monotheisms depends upon a more sweeping rejection of all supernatural forces or entities. The reason that the more sweetly reasonable forms of monotheism cannot deliver a true image of the H. O. is that they posit a supernatural being, and Mark is convinced that there could be no such thing — or at least that there *is* no such thing.

I should like a little more information about the exact meaning of "supernatural" in Mark's critique; after all, his own metaphysics of perception and of the physical

world (developed in Chs. 9 and 10) would strike some as a “spooky” picture of things, in which mind-like subjects are everywhere! But his metaphysics of the material world is carefully constructed so as not to bump up against the deliverances of the “harder” sciences.

[At least, it could not come into conflict too readily — but one never knows. Everything is connected to everything else, after all; and his metaphysics is incompatible with certain philosophical theories about the mind, ones that *do* have empirical consequences — namely, representationalist theories of the mind (see pp. 132-41). So there must be some connections, eventually, between his account of perception and a discipline like neuroscience.]

Although Mark’s rejection of the supernatural is not supposed to be a form of scientism, it strikes me as of a piece with Bultmann’s criticisms of traditional interpretations of Christianity: In the age of “the electric light and the wireless”, it is no longer possible to believe in miracles. Mark endorses the familiar claim that, after discovering “how utterly insignificant the earth, the home of humanity, actually is” (that is, our relative size and location in the “vast immensity of space and time”), it is no longer possible to believe that a personal God made us and continues to care about us. To suppose the maker of *all this* could be a “God in search of us, is an incredible proposition” (p. 157). I find these sorts of appeals to what it is “no longer possible to believe” utterly unconvincing.

Standing back, and looking at the large-scale structure of the universe, and our place in it, and learning more about the fine details of its inner workings, I should think that — *were there no positively awful states of affairs to worry about* — the rational thought should be:

Gee, I wonder whether there is more to this place than meets the eye — including, perhaps, a person (or persons) of vastly superior power who is (or who are) responsible for the whole shebang. When I contemplate the beauty

of the universe and the elegance of its laws, I can't help but think that it might well be so. And I should look into that fine-tuning argument everyone is talking about; it might well clinch the deal.

In the absence of appeal to the problem of evil as evidence against a benevolent, personal H. O., a simple rejection of anything "supernatural" leaves me unmoved.

Reason to doubt the existence of a creator of Biblical proportions cannot really come from considerations like: "We now know we're not the center of the universe". Should Jews, Christians, or Muslims ever have thought that, really? The scriptures of the Western monotheisms are full of hints that there is a vast "other world" that we barely glimpse; they provide little reason to think we are God's sole creation. We are insignificant specks — "What is man, that Thou art mindful of him?" — and yet, it is meant to be part of the majesty of God that he loves us so intensely despite our objective insignificance. In the Gospels, there is still further emphasis upon the lowliness of the people to whom God especially comes; and the point is not that, really, they are heroes in disguise. No, they actually are nobodies, with nothing special to offer. Should they be shocked to discover that their planet is not the center of the universe?

Finding out that we're a little planet in a middling galaxy should not come as a big surprise to the reflective adherents of any of the main forms of Western theism.

I find nothing compelling, then, in the sweeping anti-supernaturalism that constitutes the second half of Mark's attack upon the idea that there is a personal, creator God who loves us and is actively pursuing us. This is not to say that I see no serious intellectual problems for the traditional monotheisms; only that these problems are not in the places Mark supposes. As Mark points out, today's village atheists are simply repeating age-old arguments when they raise the problem of evil. However, one has to admit that there is a serious problem here for the traditional theist like myself. It is various aspects of the problem of evil, and not the

alleged implausibility of supernatural phenomena or our spatial location in the universe, that keeps me awake at night.

So far as I can see, the only substantial barrier between Mark and Christianity is his opposition to supernaturalism — his conviction that nothing like a miracle could possibly have occurred. Could Christ have been, as Christians believe, identical (at least “in substance”) with the greatest possible being, and the clearest revelation of the one who deserves Mark’s label, “H. O.”? Mark accepts the validity of Christ’s radical call to selfless *agape*, and he is willing to place Christ’s death at the crux of salvation history. The moral enormities Mark attributes to Yahweh cannot really be placed at Christ’s feet (except to the extent that Christ does not apparently denounce the troubling passages from Hebrew scriptures).

(It may be that, in the background, the problem of evil is lurking as a reason to doubt that the H. O. could be personal and powerful and loving in any very literal sense of these words. As I say, this is a reason for doubt that I regard as extremely pressing; it is not, however, a line of argument upon which Mark relies at all in *Saving God*.)

To be fair, there is more to his rejection of the supernatural than just claims about what it is no longer possible to believe, in this day and age. The supernatural components of religions that he finds most objectionable are: a personal God who could, in principle, answer prayers; and a life to come, with rewards and punishments. Answered prayer and an afterlife provide a dual recipe for what Mark calls “idolatry” — i.e., attempts to manipulate God, to serve God for our own selfish ends, and to thereby avoid the transformation *agape* would require. But, even though petitionary prayer and belief in a coming kingdom may devolve into these kinds of inappropriate responses to God, especially in the hands of corrupt television preachers, I daresay few serious adherents of the mainstream monotheisms believe they can get whatever they want from God, or are able to enter deeply into their faith tradition for *purely* selfish reasons. Speaking on behalf of Christianity, I would point out that the “kingdom of heaven”, as described in the New

Testament, is not a place we will eventually reach, where we will finally get what we want. Christ announced that the kingdom is *here already*, and the world to come is just the culmination of a great change that is already taking place. Entering into this kingdom is something that begins now; and it is not something one does for selfish motives. We are warned of the topsy-turvy nature of this kingdom — those who will be first in the kingdom are those willing to be last, one who would lead others into it must be the servant of all.

In response to Mark's worries about the temptations of petitionary prayer, I should say that merely asking God for truly good things — for example, healing for oneself and others, or "daily bread" — is not automatically selfish or manipulative. Of course, if God were a cosmic vending machine, and we had an unlimited supply of coins, it would be hard not to treat God as a means to our ends. But few of us are in a position to believe, at least for very long, that God's love for us entails his willingness to obey our every whim.

Introducing the Real H.O.

Could "H. O." mean "Greatest Possible Being" ("GPB")? Does Mark's actual H. O. qualify as GPB? Let's see what his H. O. is like. It might turn out to be the greatest being that actually exists, without being the GPB.

First of all, Mark's faith in the H. O. is supposed to be a version of panentheism. I'm not convinced by Mark's reason for thinking the H. O. couldn't be distinct from a whole that includes everything:

Suppose that there is something created by the Highest One, but nonetheless *distinct* from the Highest One, in that it is not some part, aspect, principle, or mode of the Highest One. Call this other thing "the separate creation." If there is such a separate creation, then we would expect the perfections of the

Highest One to be to some extent reflected in that separate creation. Consider, then, the joint reality made up of the Highest One and the separate creation. It would seem that this joint reality might be a more appropriate object of worship than the subpart of the reality that is the Highest One. Or, at the very least, the joint reality would be an appropriate object of fealty that was not identical with the Highest One. But this is inherently at odds with our principle that the Highest One and only the Highest One deserves worship. So there is no separate creation. (P. 95)

It does not seem at all obvious to me that the “joint reality” in question would be an appropriate object of worship and fealty. A person plus a rock — even a valuable rock — is not a proper object of fealty or love, even if the person is. The sum of the two might be worth more, in some sense, but it would not thereby become a proper subject of these attitudes; and if the person is infinitely valuable, even that won’t be true — the sum won’t be worth more.

Furthermore, if the whole includes some *bad* stuff, adding it to a *very good* proper part will yield a worse whole (setting aside the case of an infinitely good part and a bad part that is not infinitely bad); and our world does indeed seem to include some very bad stuff. If the line of thought in Mark’s argument were at all plausible (which I do not think that it is), shouldn’t one have concluded that the H. O. is just the sum of all the *good* stuff? But then the result would not be panentheism.

This assumption — that the H. O. must contain everything — is only indirectly related to the other main theme in Mark’s positive theology: namely, the idea that the H. O. is either Existence Itself (a hypothesis Mark takes seriously but finally rejects) or the process of Existence’s exemplifying itself for the purpose of disclosing itself — the Outpouring of Existence. Neither Existence itself, nor its Outpouring, seems, on the face of it, to be a whole that contains everything else (every other concrete object) as a part. Given just the assumption that the H. O. contains everything else among its parts or aspects, neither choice would be the first thing to

come to mind. So how did we get from panentheism to Existence or the Outpouring of Existence? The first considerations Mark gives for supposing that the H. O. is Existence or its Outpouring are something Yahweh was supposed to have said about himself, and the medieval Jewish and Christian glosses on this idea (Ch. 7).

To take these sources (Hebrew scripture and more recent theological tradition) seriously would be to say that the H. O. was partially revealing its nature through the Torah and subsequent theological reflection upon it — but then Mark would be picking and choosing some parts of the “Old Testament” portrayal of God as valid and others as misunderstandings; and he would not, then, be in a position to deny adherents of monotheistic religions the right to pick and choose as well, purging Yahweh of defects apparently ascribed to him by some biblical writers, and emphasizing instead the gradual revelation of a God of perfect justice and love.

In Ch. 8, Mark looks for an argument that does not depend upon revealed religion but still yields the conclusion that the H. O. is Existence or the Outpouring of Existence. The argument of the chapter is difficult, to say the least. But suppose there were some reason to narrow down the choice of candidate for H. O. to just these two. Which should be chosen? If Existence really does exemplify itself in concrete things in order to disclose itself, and if the H. O. would be more perfect if intentions and something like love could be analogically ascribed to it than if such things could *not* be ascribed to it (a principle that I believe Mark would accept); then I think one should pick Existence Itself, since *it* is doing the “pouring out”. The *process* (i.e., the Outpouring) is the thing Existence does for a certain purpose; the process reflects that purpose, but it is Existence that is doing something (analogically speaking), and so Existence that should be awarded the (analogical) laurel of willing, loving, ruling, etc. Mark’s reason for choosing the Outpouring rather than the thing that is pouring itself out is that the former “is the more inclusive object of worship, for it includes not only the serene perfections of Existence Itself, but the perfections inherent in its universal act of outpouring and self-disclosure” (p. 120).

The argument is vulnerable to the same kind of objection raised earlier against the argument for panentheism. Mark's metaphysics distinguishes between Existence Itself and what Existence does, namely, pouring itself out; and the latter process is treated as a further thing in its own right, something that can vey with Existence for our fealty and love (and win the contest). A metaphysics that makes this kind of distinction between a thing and its activity should presumably also say that, for example, a lifeguard who heroically saves a child in dangerously cold water should be distinguished from the act of swimming that she performs. She is one thing, her act of swimming is another. We may admire her for her swimming, and feel gratitude, love, and devotion towards her for what she did. But it would be a sort of "category mistake" (to fall back upon an oft-abused expression) to feel gratitude and love *towards her swimming*, rather than towards *her*, because her act of swimming includes her plus something more that is also very good, namely, the act she performed. It would even be inappropriate to shift these personal attitudes from her to the sum (if there is such a thing) consisting of her-plus-her-act-of-swimming. Granted, the latter thing in some sense includes more than just her; and the "something more" is a good thing, namely, the good act she performed. But this odd hybrid sum does not deserve more respect and gratitude than the lifeguard herself — indeed, it seems the wrong sort of thing toward which to have such attitudes.

Is Mark's H. O. the GPB?

Having explored the metaphysical details of Mark's candidate for the H. O., I return to the question: is his H. O. the GPB? Much GPB theology consists in reporting value judgments about the amount of greatness that would be bestowed upon a thing by various attributes. For what it is worth, let me report one of my own judgments of this sort: Compare Existence or the Outpouring of Existence for the purpose of self-disclosure, on the one hand; with a personal being of maximal power, knowledge, and benevolence, on the other. If the latter description represents a sort of being that truly is *possible*; and if Existence or the Outpouring thereof is *not* possibly such as to satisfy this description; then the GPB is not Existence or the Outpouring

thereof. Since the description seems to me to be satisfiable, and Mark's candidates could not be a person of this sort, I conclude that the thing Mark declares to be "the Highest One" is not, in fact, the greatest possible being.

What should Mark say in response to my judgment that, even if a God satisfying the traditional description does not *actually* exist, such a being would have been better than his candidate for H. O. actually is; and therefore "H. O." and "greatest possible being" come apart? Mark could deny the possibility of a being satisfying the traditional theistic description of the GPB; or he could allow that the H. O. is not the GPB, merely the greatest *actual* being, and also worthy of something akin to religious devotion.

I think he should do the latter in any case — or at least admit that the H. O. could have been "higher" than it actually is. Wouldn't the Outpouring of Existence Itself have been *better* — analogically speaking, *more loving* — had there been a lot less pain and suffering? If so, then, analogically speaking, either the H. O. could have loved more than it actually has done and so could have been better than it is; or something greater than the H. O. (namely, the Outpouring of Existence that would have existed, had there been less suffering) is possible. In either case, the H. O. does not have the maximal degree of greatness that it is possible for a being to have.

The Salvific Role of the H. O.

Mark's H. O. is supposed to be able to do some heavy lifting, in the realm of the religious life; it is supposed to play something like the role of redeemer. It must be able to strengthen us, providing grace "from outside" to fight the war against our inward-curving nature and thereby moving us toward *agape* — at least, it is supposed to be able to do this once we have grasped its nature and gotten on its side. The chief means by which Mark's H. O. performs this function is by inspiring a

sense of gratitude in us, once we understand the “doubly donatory” character of reality.

This takes us to Mark’s metaphysics of perception and his relational version of neutral monism. It is an ingenious metaphysical system, one that I admire very much; but it requires some work to wrap one’s mind around it; and it is not clear how inspired one should be by a world with the metaphysical structure Mark posits. Here is a sketch of Mark’s neutral monism.

Take any point in space. Now imagine what it would be like to look around, in all directions, from that point. One would stand in perceptual relations to things — seeing the leaves as green, the apple as red, the sky as blue, etc. Each of these, in veridical perception, is a real disclosure of an aspect of the leaves, the apple, and the sky, respectively; an aspect which, relative to that point in space, already exists even when nobody is looking. These aspects are, in a way, parochial; if we had different kinds of eyes, we’d pick up on different aspects of things; but those alternative aspects are there too — we just happen, when we get ourselves into the right location, to select certain ones. We are sampling the ways in which the surroundings are disclosing themselves relative to that point. What’s going on, at all these locations uninhabited by animals, are phenomena very similar to the ones we experience. The fabric of the supposedly non-mental physical world is woven out of relations of appearing. Some of these relations are exactly like the ways in which we are appeared to by things, while many others are inaccessible to us but similar in kind.

These ways of appearing play the same role, in Mark’s theory, as Russell’s “unsensed sensibilia” in his version of neutral monism. (They have been immortalized in the limerick, “Said Lord Russell to Lady Cecilia...”.)

Does the fact that reality has the metaphysical structure of Mark’s neutral monism (supposing it to be a fact) fill me with gratitude? Well, it depends a lot upon the

kinds of appearing that are being done. My injured foot presents a painful appearance. If that's a legitimate example of the ways objects can appear to somebody, and similar ones are happening everywhere, even to empty points in space, then my sense of gratitude will begin to seep away.

Don't get me wrong. I'm a big fan of revisionary metaphysical projects that try to fit the manifest and scientific images together by reconceiving the nature of the physical. Russell's theory in *Our Knowledge of the External World*, a neutral monism that is importantly similar to Mark's metaphysics (though it is a sense-data theory, not a relational theory-of-appearing), is, by my lights, one of the great achievements of 20th century systematic metaphysics. Mark's view is a worthy alternative. So his "doubly donatory" neutral monism ought to evoke a sense of wonder in anyone with a taste for metaphysics.

To that extent, I agree that Mark's H. O. should inspire awe in those who accept its existence. If the world is really as he says, it is a far stranger place than most of us have imagined. But, when contemplating its nature, I must bear firmly in mind that, although unsensed sensibilia may be *like* disclosures, sharing the same metaphysical structure with real disclosures of reality to perceiving minds; nevertheless, there is no one there to appreciate them — unless we go all the way with Leibniz, and make every point a monad, with a rudimentary mind. (Unlike Leibniz's monad, an unoccupied point in Mark's version of space-time could be said to have "windows" that are "open" to everything around it.) So, the lights are on, but, in most places, no one is home — no actual act of perception or understanding takes place. If *real* disclosure is the goal of Existence (or its Outpouring), it hasn't done a very good job of realizing that goal.

Mark's H. O., then, does not seem to me to provide a lot of help with the predicament which, I agree, we are in — i.e., the fact that we are "fallen" creatures who ought to strive for *agape*, but who lack the resources to make more than feeble efforts in that direction. It's not clear that the unsensed "disclosures" really make the world a

better place (what if they're from the pain family?), or that I should be very grateful to Existence for having hit upon this particular metaphysical scheme.

Conclusion

Despite all the interesting arguments and provocative proposals in *Saving God*, it seems to me to have failed in its two chief aims. Mark does not produce arguments that seriously undermine the possibility of there being the sort of God posited by the most sophisticated theological traditions within the Abrahamic faiths. Adherents of these religions must grapple with various challenging versions of the problem of evil; but they have little to fear from Mark's objections. His own candidate for Highest One has dubious claim to the title. It is not as great as it is possible for anything to be (since it, at least, could have been greater or have been supplanted by something greater); and, by my lights, it is not nearly as great as an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly benevolent personal being would be. In any case, it cannot satisfactorily perform the distinctive salvific function that has been assigned to it.