

Mark Johnston

Saving God: Religion after Idolatry.

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Saving God: Religion after Idolatry is a brilliant book: erudite, intriguing and inventive. Anyone interested in the concept of God and the relationship between religion and naturalism will want to read it. That said, even sympathetic readers (I count myself as such) may find it difficult to decide just what Johnston's proposal comes to and how to assess it. What follows will leave out much and won't come close to doing justice to Johnston's arguments.

Johnston reminds us early of life's large-scale defects: suffering, the depredations of aging, the loss of what we care about, untimely death. On top of this, we are constitutionally bent to favor our own interests, even to the point of willingness to subjugate ourselves to less-than-savory supernatural beings. The redeemed life would reconcile us to life's defects and give us "a way to go on, keeping faith in the importance of goodness, and an openness to love." Something deserving of the title "God" or "The Highest One" would be worthy of our devotion not least because orienting ourselves toward it would be salvific in just this way.

As the subtitle implies, idolatry is a central concern of the book. At its root, idolatry amounts to worshipping something less than The Highest One for the sake of our own unredeemed ends. It is "the attempt to evade or ignore the demanding core of true religion; radical self-abandonment to the Divine as manifested in the turn toward others and toward objective reality." (24) Johnston is emphatic: the idea of a supernatural God is near kin to idolatry. It tempts us to treat this God as a patron from whom to wheedle what we think we want. The idea of the afterlife is another source of idolatrous temptation. It would just be an arena for the endless satisfaction of our unredeemed desires. However, if our worldly orientation changed, the blandishments of never-ending satisfaction would become irrelevant. As for St. Paul's insistence that without the Resurrection, faith in Christ is futile, Johnston's comment is withering: "Here we have the real despoliation of Christ." (176)

Johnston's alternative assumes a version of naturalism: "Every event will admit of a description of its *ultimate constituents* in a vocabulary that allows those constituents to be brought under the aegis of natural law." (49) This doesn't entail that the objects of natural science are all there is. A wedding, for example, is *constituted* by events that follow natural laws, but constitution is not identity and natural science abstracts from what makes a wedding a wedding. This opens up the possibility that the Highest One is *constituted* by the natural realm but not identical with it. Here is Johnston's proposal:

The Highest One = the outpouring of Existence itself by way of its exemplification in ordinary existents for the sake of the self-disclosure of Existence itself. (116)

Note that the Highest One is a process—neither a being nor Being itself. The idea of the Highest One as Being's self-disclosure is part of what distinguishes Johnston's panentheism from mere

pantheism. This notion of disclosure is crucial for Johnston's view, though difficult to grasp. Being's disclosure is Being's *presence*—its *making itself present*. Johnston argues at length that presence doesn't depend on "mental representations," connected to things by way of some combination of causation and resemblance. Things *present* in all their various possible modes of presentation whether or not we happen to be there to notice. When we see something, for example, we are "sampling" presence rather than creating presence by some mysterious act of representation. If we see dogs running in the front yard, "[t]he experience is not made up of mental stuff, whatever that might be... It is made up of the dogs and the manner in which they present." (130) The crucial but difficult idea is not just that things *exist* whether we observe them or not; they *present* or *disclose themselves* whether we are aware of their presence or not.

Properly understood, Johnston believes, all this should fill us with deep gratitude:

First, I am an expression of Being Itself, as are all the things present to me... Second, all of THIS is made available to me, gratis... I have already won the cosmic lottery. Seeing all this, perhaps I can then begin to overcome the centripetal force of the self... and instead turn toward reality and the real needs of others. (156–157)

If fully executed, this turn will be toward *agape* or radical altruism, in which we give no privilege to our own interests, but merely see ourselves as one among others, no more important, even if no less, than those others. If this happens, we overcome death because we survive in "the onward rush of humanity." (185)

This remarkable claim is the confluence of two ideas. The first is defended at length in Johnston's *Surviving Death* (Princeton University Press, 2010), which is in some ways an essential companion to *Saving God*. Johnston embraces and defends the Buddhist notion of *anatta*: there is no separate, substantial self. However, this doesn't mean there is no such thing as personal identity. Instead, personal identity is *constituted* by certain patterns of identification and self-concern. If one comes to identify sufficiently deeply with the interests of all others, then "one stands to all others in the identity-constituting relation that one formerly stood in just to oneself." (185) Such a person "acquires a new face every time a baby is born." (185)

There is a qualifier. That hopeful description applies to those whose wills are genuinely, thoroughly good. (*Surviving Death*, 341) If the redeemed life is the life of those who fully embody *agape*, however, most of us will never be redeemed. The most we can hope for is to be "good enough" to see past our own deaths to a future where others flourish.

What are we to make of all this? One set of hesitations will come from Johnston's right flank: the more conventionally religious will protest with some justice that Johnston doesn't do them justice. Here I will sketch a different sort of worry.

Even if we grant Johnston's broad naturalism, his claims about presence, or the more general idea that Being is continually disclosing itself, or the idea I am an exemplification of Existence itself are hard to assess. As poetic notions, they have a charm; whether they are true, or even what exactly they mean is less clear. Similarly, Johnston's account of personal identity will be controversial to say the least. The arguments—especially in *Surviving Death*—are subtle

and complex, and the conclusions are often highly unintuitive. Of course philosophy is often like that, and Johnston isn't offering his proposals as candidates for creedal status. But he is offering an account meant to address the "large scale defects" in human life, and to show how we could "see through death" and retain faith in the importance of goodness. What does all the elegant metaphysics have to do with that?

Suppose someone feels he has won the cosmic lottery because he is alive and finds the world remarkable. Does the intelligibility of that thought depend on anything like a panentheistic metaphysics? Couldn't it make sense even if Johnston's metaphysics of presence is confused? Or suppose someone has no view whatsoever on the metaphysics of the self, but believes that whatever she really is, she is no more important than anyone else and that it would be wrong for her to act otherwise. Is there some gap here that philosophy needs to fill?

Or consider a different sort of point. One reason why some people keep faith with love and goodness is not because Existence seems to pour itself out beneficently; it is because the world sometimes produces utter horrors. Such people may think that Reality is utterly indifferent to our suffering; seeing vivid confirmation of that thought may be precisely the *katalepsis* (81) that shocks them out of their selfishness. But if this is a "seizure by grace" it is not one that makes the unfolding of Existence appear holy.

Perhaps the way to put it is this: compared to traditional theism, Johnston's notion of salvation is minimalist. This is not necessarily a criticism; salvation as Johnston understands it is a noble thing. But part of what makes a minimalist account of salvation philosophically appealing is precisely that it seems not to call for metaphysics. For some, at least, part of its virtue is precisely that it can stand without commitment to a Highest One. That is not the case Johnston intends to make, but the signs he has posted seem to point in that direction.

Allen Stairs

University of Maryland