RETHINKING GOD

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Resumo

Acreditar em Deus é comumente entendido como envolvendo as seguintes três proposições: 1. Deus atualmente existe (e talvez necessariamente); 2. Deus tem uma natureza definida ou uma essência, e pode ser descrito por meios finitos; 3. Deus é independente do resto do mundo. Neste trabalho eu exploro o que acontece à religião natural se negarmos cada uma destas proposições, isoladamente. A negação destas proposições foi defendida tácita ou explicitamente por Meillassoux, Levinas e Whitehead. Ao invés de mostrar que a religião não poderia sobreviver à negação de qualquer destas proposições, eu procuro mostrar como novas alternativas religiosas emergem do descarte isolado de cada uma das proposições. Para mostrar isso, procuro considerar o que seria uma negação religiosa de cada uma das três proposições – ou seja, como negar as proposições sem cair em alguma forma de ateísmo.

Palavras-chave: Deus. Religião natural. Meillassoux. Levinas. Whitehead.

Abstract

Believing in God if often taken as involving the following three propositions: 1. God currently exists (perhaps necessarily so); 2. God has a definite nature or essence and therefore can be finitely described; 3. God is independent of the rest of the world. In this paper I explore what would happen to natural religion if we deny each of 1-3 (in turn). The denial of these propositions have been tacitly or explicitly defended respectively by Meillassoux, Levinas and Whitehead. Rather than showing that religion cannot do without any of them is, I intend to show how new religious possibilities are open by the denial of each of them. In order to see that, we need to consider what would be to religiously deny each of these propositions – that is, denying them without slipping into some form of atheism.

Keywords: God. Natural religion. Meillassoux. Levinas. Whitehead.

Believing in God is often understood as an attitude whose content can be expressed by at least these three propositions:

1.   God currently exists (perhaps necessarily so);

2.   God has a definite nature or essence and therefore can be finitely described (say, as the most perfect being that can be thought or as a unique omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent being);

3.   God is independent of the rest of the world – God is prior to all other things (either as its Creator or not).

1-3 are the basis of what is frequently taken as natural religion, for it is commonly held as the minimal common core among any recognizable religion. 1 is part of this core because if God does not currently exist, there could be no difference God could make on the course of things (although God could make a difference in our thoughts, as Pascal´s wager somehow explored). 2 is included in the core because otherwise 1 would make no sense and believing in God would be vacuous, would be no more than a promissory note. Finally, 3 is vindicated by claiming that God is self-standing – like a classical substance – and does not rely on anything else; God has no need of anything else.   The three propositions relate to each other in different ways – 3 can be said to ground 2 and these two can be said to ground 1. In any case, they together spell out what is commonly meant by believing in God.

Yet, in the last hundred years or so, there have been advocates of the negation of each of these propositions. God has been conceived as not independent of the world – and therefore not as substance but rather as necessitating something else; as necessarily deprived of an assimilable definition (or essence) and as not currently existing – albeit not necessarily so. To be sure, this recent opposition to these three propositions didn't come from atheists or agnostics who would either attempt to exorcise God from their picture of the world or to show that God makes no difference. Rather, the opposition to 1-3 came from three philosophers who were engaged in trying to make sure God had a crucial place and play an important role in the world. The three independent opposition to each of the propositions attempted to ensure a respectable role and a special role for God in their conception of things. The denial of each of these three central tenets of what is normally taken as believing in God didn't come, so to speak, from outside but

instead was entrenched in their robust but reformed belief in God. Denying 1, 2 or 3 was for these philosophers a way to improve belief in God – make it sounder, more robust, more *sui generis* or more important. As I won't be primarily interested in the detailed argument that based the opposition to each of these propositions, I will only briefly introduce the three characters.

Chronologically, I start with the denial of 3. Whitehead intended to take God not as "an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse" but as "their chief exemplification" (PR: 343). He conceived the world as composed of actual entities, God among them, that enjoy an interdependence between them. Each actual occasion – actual entities that are not God – have their creative process inscribed in the consequent nature of God, he claims that such nature is "the fluent world become everlasting by its objective immortality in God" (PR: 347). As "the objective immortality of actual occasions requires the primordial permanence of God" (PR: 347), God is only completed with the presence of an always fluent world. God needs to perceive the world in the interdependence of the actual entities in order to gain actuality for, according to Whitehead, there could be no vacuous actuality – something that exists actually while affecting nothing else in the world. God's nature is given by the world and therefore God as such, and as an actual entity, cannot be devoid of anything else. It is precisely because we need God to attain objective immortality – so that our deeds don't vanish and our creative gestures contribute with the growing complexity of the world – that God's nature has to depend on worldly actual occasions. In Whitehead's scheme, it is not God who wrote the world up but rather the world that makes God what God is. God's nature depends partially on what goes on in the world – God, as much as the world, cannot be defined by anything once and for all for God's nature is determined by actual occasions. As a consequence, God cannot be independent from the rest of the world. Whitehead's theology of process goes ahead to reject 3 and make God an immanent part of a society of actual entities.

The rejection of 2 was put forward, perhaps in a less explicit manner, from the contrasting point of view of Levinas. He purported to make sure God is "infinity" and therefore "unassimilable alterity, absolute difference with relation to anything that is shown, signaled […] or recalled – with respect to anything that is presented and represented and is akin to the finite and the Same" (DH: 74). Levinas conceives of God

as the irreducible other that cannot even be understood or described without betraying the *sui generis* element of an encounter with the divine other. God is completely extraordinary. Levinas' movement is to place God utterly out of reach for any attempt at definition – God transcends any definition for an appeal from the Other is always an appeal from an irreducible third person and this is why the appeal has a force. God's call is neither about reasoning and calculation nor about presentable essences, it is about what moves us to look towards something out of this world. In particular, God is not a Big Being that is everywhere or that rules everything. Based on some Talmudic traditions, Levinas understands God as outside the scope of any theory, it is in the movement of faith that one ought to think about God – in the practice of being driven towards God and not in any theoretical exercise. That is, in the practice of being centered on an Other, and relying on a God that cannot be described in anything that resemble my own terms. Levinas thus rejects 2 claiming that no finite amount of words could possibly describe God.

Finally and more recently, Meillassoux has famously argued that God does exist yet, but this is contingent. He contrasts this idea with that of the atheist who "is satisfied with the unsatisfied territory that religion cedes to it" (DI: 226) for she accepts the world without God in the terms religion pictures it and tries to make this territory acceptable. Meillassoux rather recommends believing in God because God doesn't exist – belief itself brings in exactly the territory which is deprived to the atheist by religion. He claims that God does not exist and has no responsibility concerning the evil currently found around – in this the atheist is correct for "no one can really wants to be saved by a currently existing God against whom […] [heavy] charges are lodged" (ID: 228). But the hope for a world of justice cannot be exorcized all together – one should not agree with the atheist that God's non-existence is necessary. For Meillassoux, it is only a contingent matter of fact that makes God absent and we can hope for a future where God will come to exist and no evil will persist. For him, this hope is reasonable because everything is necessarily contingent and the only thing reason can assure is that there is no sufficient reason for anything to be the way it is. It follows that God's non-existence is also factual and nothing could possibly prevent the advent of God's existence – for nothing can revoke the principle that makes facticity necessary.

Meillassoux, therefore, rejects 1 and holds that believing in God is sounder and easier if God doesn't currently exist.

Indeed, rejecting 1 in a non-atheist manner seems to entail the acceptance of 2 – some definition of God would have to be accepted for one to say that God could come to exist (and hope that would be the case). It could, however, be taken together with a rejection of 3 – although Meillassoux rejects that any action can bring about the existence of God (there are no necessary connections for everything is necessarily contingent). It could be that God will come to exist if, say, the circumstances in the world were favorable, so we could have the rejection of 1 combined with the rejection of 3 (and the acceptance of 2). Also we could have the rejection of 2 combined with the rejection of 3 – God could depend on the world and have no essence whatsoever. To be sure, our three characters were examples of rejection of each proposition on their own – Whitehead accepts 1 and 2 (while making a qualification on the last one), Levinas accepts 1 and 3 and Meillassoux accepts 2 and 3 (because God would only come to exist by chance). Also, if we reject 1, 2 and 3, we would have a position that is either unintelligible or irreversibly close to atheism. I'll concentrate on how the three propositions can be denied one by one.

Rejecting 1 has the advantage of dissolving the problem of evil. A (current) non-existent God is exculpated from any ill-doing or injustice in the world. There's nothing God could do because in order to do something, someone must exist. Removed from existence, God is exempt from any demerit (and any merit). Believing in a non-existent God is a purely messianic gesture: it is an exercise in hope. As far as religious belief in God is concerned, rejecting 1 allows for a space and a figure of hope without the onus of explaining how hope mingles with a present state of calamity and misery. Hope is kept intact no matter what happens in the world – and it is associated to the name of God. In fact, messianic hope was often invoked to help dealing with the misgivings of the present; a time of redemption was often associated with the existence of God. Because God exists, claims the argument, better times may come. The revised argument, rejecting 1, will rather go: because God can exist, better times may come.

The rejection of 1 also brings about two issues that is seldom made explicit: the issues of necessity and permanence associated to God. First, existence claims

concerning God seem to be taken as necessary judgments. Perhaps because proofs of the existence of God are normally taken to be a priori – if not derived from mere reflection on terms – and persuasive proofs to the contrary are rarely presented as empirical, they have been considered as carrying necessity. This can be read as a legacy from the coupling of the a priori and the necessary and once this coupling is undone, there is room for something to be both a priori and contingent. It is well-known now that Kripke has shown how reference-fixing descriptions can be known a priori and contingent: "cats are animals", "Adam was the first man" or "Venus is the first star to appear in the evening" are reference-fixing descriptions that can prove to be false; cats, for example, could be shown to be robots and if this happens it could be unnatural to claim that there are no cats. Analogously, one could use the claim "God exists" or "God doesn't exist" as a reference-fixing device (as one can use any predication of God to stipulate what one is talking about). Once we establish with "God exists" what we're talking about – perhaps because God does exist in this possible world – we can try and find God in other possible worlds. And, possibly, fail to find God even in this world for we have defined God as existing only in order to fix the reference of the term. In this case, the existence of God would be contingent albeit a priori. One could also claim that the existence of God is contingent because is an a posteriori judgment – for instance, justified by inductive arguments. If inductive arguments from perceptual data concerning what goes on in this world, the conclusion is dependent on the data used and therefore on the possible world where this data comes from. The existence of God would therefore be contingent as a consequence of being grounded in empirical, for instance, inductive arguments. Or, at least, it would be logically contingent or metaphysically contingent – while still being physically (or factually) non-contingent. This is a position open to advocates of inductive arguments for the existence of God, such as Richard Swinburne. In general, God has been often conceived as a necessary, trans-world entity. But if we take God as worldly, it is possible to compare a Godly world with a Godless world and this again can inspire hope. In other worlds, it could be desirable to understand God as contingent.

The second issue brought about by the rejection of 1 is the permanence of God – God's subsistence in time. The issue now is not about the trans-world presence of God but rather about his presence in all epochs. Neither the atheist is ready to contemplate a

future where God has come to existence, nor the believer considers seriously the possibility of God's death. Yet a temporary God is a possible article of faith: God could have ceased to exist after creation – or after an equally suitable remarkable event – and could be, as we saw, a promise for the future (or could be intermittent: a recent novelty with days counted, for example). A provisional God would be less of a substance – understood as self-standing or as a variation of something that is *causa sui* (Meillassoux's God is not *causa sui* because there are no causes in his universe). A God with an end and a start surely raises problems concerning sovereignty; Meillassoux himself is clear that his principle of facticity according to which everything is necessarily contingent cannot be affected by (an eventually existing) God. A non-ever-lasting God cannot be omnipotent for there ought to be other forces that would have brought about God's commencement or promote God's end. Although less than omnipotent, a non-ever-lasting God needs not be contemporary of bad times. Tim Williamson has hinted that there are connections between permanentism – the thesis that everything that exists, exists permanently – (and temporarism, its negation) with necessitism – the thesis that everything that exists, exists necessarily – (and contingentism, is negation). Similarly, the contingency of God's existence strongly suggests is temporary nature – and this is the case in Meillassoux. A temporary God is one that can be associated with the best of times, in the future or in the past.

Rejecting 2 separates out one's belief in God and one's beliefs about God. There could be a contact and a relation to God – for instance that of faith, reliance or obedience – not mediated by any cognitive access at all, for there is nothing to be *known* about God, apart from one's acquaintance with God. Faith is made independent of any theology in the broad sense of the term for there is no room at all for any theological knowledge – there is nothing to be known. There have been many movements towards asserting the priority of a relation of faith and reliance over knowledge or belief concerning religious matter: asserting a certain primacy of the religious practice. An explicit rejection of 2 places the force of an appeal from God – and the strength of faith – before any theoretical effort in a strong basis as there is nothing about God to be known. If 2 is rejected while 1 is accepted, the only fact about God is that God exists – and maybe relates personally with some (other) persons. God appears as transcending any theory or any attempt at understanding for there is nothing to be understood. A

religious rejection of 2 makes impossible for God to be known without being felt – God is solely an object of acquaintance or rather of a non-cognitive access. There are several ways of conceiving such access that dispenses any contact related to knowledge or belief – Levinas' being one of them. From the point of view of believing in a personal God, such access can be considered as a form of direct inter-personal contact where no description is ever required. The descriptions of God offered by religious texts, for example, could here also be considered as contingent a priori reference-fixing expressions that enable us to know what we are talking about without necessarily committing us to any cognitive access to God. Rejecting 2 enables an account of people's relation to God where nothing could ever supersede personal contact – and one can compare one's relation to God as the one should entertain with a neighbor: not one of theoretical understanding, but rather one of engagement and concern.

Rejecting 3 would have God as dependent on the world, not as something unrelated to anything else but as something that is affected by whatever else exists. If God is not independent from the world, God can be affected by our acts – for God´s life and even God's nature (as in Whitehead) is dependent on worldly events. Indeed, God is said to feel rage, compassion, love and solidarity towards worldly beings and therefore is deemed to engage in personal and familiar relations with them. Rejecting 3 would take seriously this idea and understand God as in fact to some measure prey to our acts for God is not immune to what goes on among us. Hence, God's rage or compassion, love or solidarity are not just *façons de parler*, but rather express modifications in God's (emotional) life caused by worldly agents. Religiously rejecting 3 is rejecting that God can be indifferent to our sufferings and achievements. Denying aseity could sound close to rejecting God's necessity (or permanence) for, as we have seen, if God is not always and necessarily there, there should be something else on which God depends. Rejecting 3, however, as we saw, doesn't lead to rejecting 1. Whitehead would have God's nature as contingent on the world but would assert God's existence along with the world. In any case, without 3, God is tied to the world by relations of mutual dependence – the world is not simply a product of God's power, but rather the two are interconnected as if they had a common fate. That would inspire a relation of mutual responsibility where more symmetry replaces the presence of an overarching power.

Rejecting any of the three propositions pave ways for a revamped belief in God (and, arguably, a reformed theism) that dialogues with the positions held by the non-believers. I could not do more than indicate sketchily how this three (or more) alternatives could be construed and how they could be advantageous. In any one of them, something like a mid-way house between classical theism and the many faces of the non-believer could be attempted. I intended to do no much more than to claim that these alternatives are worth pursuing.

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