



Religion and Morality: A Static *fait accompli* or a Dynamic Possibility? by [Douglas R McGaughey](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).

Religion and Morality:
A Static *fait accompli* or a Dynamic Possibility?

Religion is a conundrum. We all recognize religion when we see it, but we can't define it much less say what it is. Rather than waste ink on a new attempt to define religion, these reflections examine the religious conundrum with respect to what it says about humanity. Without denying the importance of the empirical examination of the human species biologically and psychologically for assessing the role of religion in life, these reflections engage the empirical phenomena of religion *as a product of humanity*, the only species as far as we know that generates these phenomena that we readily identify as religion. In other words, the religious conundrum will be approached not by an empirical analysis of human biology/neuroscience or of particular religious traditions. In contrast, our question is: What do religious phenomena suggest about humanity's capacities and role in the order of things? By shifting from the empirical phenomena themselves to focus on the capacities that humanity must possess in order to generate religion, we can learn something profoundly significant about religion as well as identify what is universal in religion.

Were there no physical perception, humanity would have no understanding. Understanding is always understanding-of something. To be sure, we are capable of understanding things that we can't physically perceive, but it would never occur to us to seek an understanding of imperceptible things were we not to have physical perception in the first place.

This temporal sequence that begins with physical perception and leads to imperceptible understanding indicates our dependence upon the material world. Together, both perception and understanding instruct us that our welfare is dependent upon physical phenomena so that learning how to successfully negotiate in the physical world is of highest priority. In short, we ignore the physical world at our very peril.

However, the temporal sequence that leads from perception to understanding involves more than merely opening one's eyes. There are elements of understanding that are not given with perception. Furthermore, what is added in understanding to perception can even require that we deny what we are actually perceiving. There is no better example of this than the Copernican Revolution that claims that the sun is standing still and we are rotating on the surface of the earth at some 1,000 miles/hour, not to speak of the speed of 67,000 mph that the earth travels around the sun. We perceive, however, just the opposite: the sun is moving, and we are standing still. Another example: We conduct our lives in a world of Classical Physics although the world of Quantum Mechanics is very different from Classical Physics.

It is a popular misconception that the Copernican Revolution represents a threat to religion by displacing humanity from the center of the physical universe. When we shift our focus from the empirical phenomena to human capacities, we see that the Copernican Revolution placed humanity at the center of the epistemological (the knowing) universe. As far as we know, we are the only species that looks at the sun and can conclude that it is not moving but we are and that knows that there is a subatomic universe – not to mention any other species being aware of the possibility of parallel universes as in String Theory.

We arrive at this conclusion not on the basis of the empirical evidence (phenomena) but on the basis of something that we add to the empirical evidence: a mental, mathematical model that accounts for the phenomena contrary to the way they naively appear.

Mathematics is a symbol system that we find nowhere in nature. It was recognized early in human history as an acquired skill that provides humanity with an incredible power over nature. Nature on its own cannot create the pyramids or the magnificent Parthenon. The pyramids are staggering because of their size and age. The Parthenon is remarkable because it has no straight lines in it although it appears to be a rectangle.

Mathematics is only one of the symbol systems that must be acquired by humanity in order to understand. The most ubiquitous symbol systems are the languages of cultural range that separate humanity in their differences but unite humanity by a common capacity: the capacity to employ symbols *to make sense* of the world. Other symbol systems include music as well as color and stylized images used in the arts. The latter is quintessentially illustrated by the iconography of Eastern Christianity that is intentionally not three-dimensional in order to evoke a *mental image* that only the viewer can experience. It is not trivial when one says that one gains another soul when one gains another symbol system: a whole different world is opened up by the new symbol system.

The “more than empirical phenomena” needed for understanding, then, is an imperceptible system of symbols, which include concepts, mathematics, and stylized aesthetic

forms, and the acquisition of these symbol systems requires training because symbols are not innate, that is, they are not *natural*. We do not get them either by merely opening our eyes or by merely closing our eyes. Nonetheless, their inescapable necessity leads to the assumption that they occur *automatically* and gives the impression that the symbol system is *always and already* there. This may be the case. Platonic Rationalism/Realism may be correct, but we are incapable of absolutely proving (or disproving) it to be so *given our very rational limits*. Our unequivocal experience is that we don't get to anything like a Logos or eternal mathematical reality simply by closing our eyes. Along with all other symbolic systems, we have to learn both symbolic systems of the Logos and mathematics to understand what they enable us to understand.

Ernst Cassirer emphasized that awareness of the temporal sequence of experience from external phenomena to imperceptible understanding that *adds symbols systems to the phenomena* involves a revolution that as far as we know has been accomplished only by humanity – although it is a revolution that any *rational* being would be capable of undergoing. We must be careful with this term *rational*, however. Cassirer is not using it as the symbol for *instrumental reason* that gives humanity technical sovereignty over nature. Rather, Cassirer employs this symbol to indicate precisely humanity's lack of absolute sovereignty over anything, much less nature! For the school of Critical Idealism that Cassirer represents, reason means *order* in contrast to chaos, and the very conditions that make possible our experience of order are profoundly limited when it comes to grasping that order. In fact, we cannot prove or disprove that there is anything like a universal order of physical or moral laws, but our understanding and actions depend upon our assuming both along with the Logos and mathematics. These assumptions indicate the depth of faith that is involved in all understanding and action.

Other species appear not to be rational not only because they have a limited capacity for *instrumental reason* and can respond to their environments (almost only) instinctually, *by nature*, but also because they appear unable to approach empirical phenomena *as if* they were governed by a universal order, that is, a system of imperceptible laws. The "*as if*" here represents humanity's *hypothetical limits*. We cannot prove or disprove that there are physical laws that are universal at all times and in all places not only because we can never get to all times and all places to determine their universal validity but also because physical laws are imperceptible. They are part of the symbol system that humanity must *necessarily* add to phenomena in order to understand them. We can offer proofs or dis-proofs only for phenomena that are accessible to the senses.

Mathematics give us certainty only where we have a logical order governed by an "=" sign. This logical order is extremely beneficial, but it is a human construction that is grounded in the acquisition of an *assumed, analytical order* – in the case of mathematics and logic, a mental not a physical order. An analytical order, like logic generally, contains all of its characteristics within itself. For example, "all bachelors are unmarried men" or "only three lines can intersect

at 90° at one point.” Presuming (!) that one already knows what a “bachelor” is or what it means for lines to intersect, the symbols involved in these judgments are self-referential, hence, represent an *analytical order*. An individual’s understanding of the analytical order, then, requires a *deeper synthetic order* that consists in the individual’s ability to *add something to* phenomena (e.g., the symbols “bachelor” or “intersect”) that are not given directly in the phenomena. By only looking at a man, one cannot know whether or not he is a bachelor – unless he’s wearing a ring, but a wedding ring is a symbol that one must acquire and apply to the physical ring; one can mis-understand the ring. Shifting to lines: The intersection of two lines is by definition physically impossible because the intersection would have to have extension for it physically to be and, by definition, extension applies to a line, not a point. In other words, although understanding involves *analytical order*, all analytical order ultimately requires a *synthetic capacity* to add things to phenomena that are not there in the phenomena. Immanuel Kant pointed out in the third critique, *The Critique of Judgment*, that at their origin all analytic judgments are synthetic. What was originally a product of metaphor subsequently is taken to be literal – as a *dead* metaphor (as Jean Paul and Paul Ricoeur liked to say). Kant meant that mathematics is *synthetic, not analytic* not because it leads to a synthesized totality of judgments, which is synthesis as *nexus*, but because mathematics is a totality of judgments that *must be added to* phenomena in order to understand them; mathematics is a synthesis of *compositio*.

A priori synthetic judgments, then, are symbolic elements that humanity adds to phenomena that are not given with the phenomena themselves. Given that *by definition* they cannot appear in the phenomena, they are incapable of proof or disproof. As a consequence, all understanding is limited not only because of our perspectival perception and lack of access to things “as they are to themselves” but also because all judgment involves adding things that are not in the phenomena and, as experience painfully teaches, we can *add the wrong things* in our attempts to understand.

The judgment that physical phenomena are governed by a rational order involves two parts: 1) perception of the physical world and 2) confidence that there is an *a priori* synthetic order that humanity can *add to* its perception of the physical world to understand it. Because the second element requires an *a priori* synthetic system of symbols that must be acquired through learning, not physical experience, it is *never capable of absolute empirical proof or disproof* precisely because *a priori* synthetic judgments cannot appear in the senses. As powerful as it is, *understanding is profoundly limited* and depends upon *the assumption of a rational order*, not the unequivocal certainty of rational order. When Critical Idealism talks of reason, then, it is talking about the *a priori* synthetic of all judgment that is grounded in the assumption of rational order – rather than talking about *instrumental reason*.

In short, Critical Idealism does not mean by reason “sovereign,” instrumental reason that somehow elevates humanity to absolute judgment, but CI means limited, synthetic reason’s

commitment to order. It is for this reason that Critical Reason can claim that all rational beings would have to experience the world the way that humanity does because “rational beings” refers to the capacity for *a priori* synthetic judgment, not instrumental or technical reason. There might be other rational beings capable of grasping the imperceptible orders of experience somewhere in the universe but who do not possess instrumental reason ... yet. However, all instrumental reason presupposes synthetic reason, which simply assumes that there is an order to experience.

There are perhaps other things to be learned from dreams, but a valuable lesson from them is that what we experience in them is a sequence of events without causal order. As a consequence, unlike in the waking state, we cannot predict from the dream’s phenomena what will happen next. There is no rational, that is, causal order to the phenomena of the dream.

The *a priori* nature of synthetic judgment has particular significance when it comes to understanding religious phenomena. We don’t understand religious phenomena simply by opening our eyes, and we don’t understand religious phenomena simply by closing our eyes. The “merely opening our eyes” approach to religious phenomena is what drives the French Enlightenment’s claim that “knowledge will make us better persons.” However, we are not made “better persons” merely by being descriptively analytical or by *theoretical* reason. In other words, we are not made “better persons” merely by understanding of phenomena. We can make ourselves “better persons” only by properly exercising of our *practical* reason as individuals and communities, and it is *practical* reason that opens the door to what is universal in religion, as we will maintain below.

There are two options for approaching empirical phenomena: 1) description and 2) discernment of physical laws. Both options are limited and far from absolute especially when the strict requirements of exact duplication of results and a control group are impossible – as is the case with most personal experience. Nonetheless, the discernment of physical laws is far more precise than description because description, as J.Z. Smith’s notion of “map is not territory” confirms, can never be certain that it has properly grasped the phenomena and can even be distorting no matter how precise the analytical thought that drives it.

When it comes to religious phenomena, though, the strict criteria for discernment of physical laws are incapable of being fulfilled, and mere description not only results in speculative constructions of the “self” as well as “other” (see Robert H. Sharf’s entry “Experience” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, edited by Mark C. Taylor [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998: 94-116]) but also in the greater likelihood of emphasizing of differences among religious traditions because discursive knowledge requires, precisely, distinguishing between “this” and “that.”

Description, then, approaches religious phenomena as a set of territories not capable of being accounted for exclusively by physical laws – although *the material conditions* of religious phenomena are governed by physical laws and those laws need to be identified where present. However, description by its creative character profiles, but does not invoke consciously, the other domain of experience that is governed by laws, *practical* reason.

In contrast to *theoretical* reason that seeks to understand the lawfulness of physical phenomena that are governed by the so-called blind, mechanical, efficient causality of nature, *practical* reason is governed by a different efficient causality: autonomous freedom. This form of efficient causality is *autonomous* to a degree from the blind, mechanical, efficient causality of nature because human beings are capable of causing events to happen that nature cannot cause on its own. In other words, *autonomy* here has nothing to do with independence from political, social, or religious institutions. It has to do with human creativity. To the degree (!) that humanity is capable of initiating a sequence of events that nature cannot accomplish on its own, humanity possesses a *categorical* capacity of autonomous freedom and not merely a *hypothetical*, limited capacity to describe and understand empirical phenomena.

As a system of *categorically*, efficient causality, human creativity is not mere spontaneity, randomness, and/or chaotic *but ordered*. However, the order of human creativity is self-imposed unlike the order of physical causality that is imposed upon all physical events. In other words, human creativity can choose to ignore the order that is its condition of possibility, which is precisely an indicator of its *freedom from* physical, efficient causality. Equally important, though, it cannot be successfully exercised contrary to physical, efficient causality. Autonomous freedom presupposes and must be in conformity with physical laws, but is not reducible to physical causality.

The Greek word ἀυτονομία (autonomy) means „to give oneself the law.” The capacity “to give oneself the law” presupposes that one is capable of acting or not acting according to a self-imposed law. That human beings can act contrary to the law of which they are capable of imposing on themselves is what leads to the belief that human creativity is mere spontaneity, randomness, and/or chaotic. However, where there is efficient causality, there is lawful order, and humanity is the species that clearly is accountable to two complementary, lawful systems of efficient causality: physical laws and autonomous freedom. The laws that govern autonomous freedom are the moral law, grounded in an extra-ordinary categorically, efficient causality as we have described so frequently in other postings of the M-Word Blog.

Whereas our acknowledgment of physical laws is demanded by nature, neither symbols, nor intellectual virtues, nor moral virtues are naturally innate to humanity. As we have said too many times, we don’t get them merely by closing our eyes. They all must either be learned as is the case with symbols, physical laws, and “intellectual virtues” (universal, moral principles) or

acquired as “moral virtues” of habit (see the M-Word Blog entry “Critical Thinking in Morality”) if we are to be (creatively) successful in the world. All of these internal elements of human experience are *a priori* (i.e., not derived from the phenomena to which they apply), and they all require their acquisition, acknowledgement, and/or self-imposition by each individual.

Although Critical Idealism can be called a “turn to the subject,” it is not a turn to individual isolationism. The individual is inseparable from a physical and social world. We have had indicators of the individual’s rootedness in a public world not only when it comes to our dependence upon physical appearances 1) for any and all understanding (i.e., for *theoretical* reason), 2) for any and all initiation of a sequence of events that nature on its own cannot accomplish (i.e., for *practical* reason), and 3) with the acknowledgement that symbol systems as well as intellectual virtues have to be learned and moral virtue requires a world in which we can experience extremes of excess and deficiency with respect to things and relationships.

We can say that the individual is embedded in two cultures: one that is visible (a culture of technical skills), and one that is invisible (a culture that encourages the exercising of one’s internal capacities by cultivating one’s creative talent and the self-imposition of moral principles to guide the exercising of those creative talents). Whereas the culture of skills is historically shaped by the technical achievements of one’s society, the invisible culture “that promotes the moral will” is universal and timeless. It’s citizens are found in all societies and at all times, and it is this invisible culture that aids the individual’s efforts to rise above mere animality to exercise those creative capacities that are found to the degree that they are found in humanity nowhere else in nature.

Whereas our encounters with religion are encounters with external institutions, rituals, creeds, and social hierarchies, religion in this external form is only the shell, the historical manifestation, of the invisible and internal, religious culture that unites all of humanity as a set of capacities and moral responsibilities. Religion defined in terms of its historical manifestation is *static religion* that requires the individual’s and the community’s *conformity to the institution*. Religion defined in terms of the invisible and internal, religious culture is *dynamic religion* that requires the individual’s cultivation of her/his talents and assumption of moral responsibility for the exercising of those talents. Static religion is a phenomenon of the marketplace. Dynamic religion is a phenomenon of imperceptible character that is continually developing.

The fact that one is not moral by nature (instinct) and that one’s capacities are profoundly limited means that the call to and promise of perfection is an element of static, not dynamic religion. Dynamic religion recognizes the need for moral transformation but not because humanity is corrupted by sin. Rather, moral transformation is necessary because of ignorance. The individual has to learn of her/his moral capacities and responsibilities, and that can occur only through accumulated experience that include wrong choices and self-serving actions to the

detriment of others as well as oneself. However, dynamic religion underscores that *the capacities* (!) and moral order (!) that make it possible for the individual to act improperly can never be eradicated. As long as we possess the autonomous freedom that is the ground of morality, we are capable of beginning afresh with our moral efforts regardless of our past. It is a crucial contribution on the part of the religious community to remind us of that possibility no matter how deep our regret over our past actions. *Moral transformation is always possible because the capacities and lawful order that govern it are ineradicable.*

Emphasis on imperceptible character of moral effort in dynamic religion does not leave the individual isolated with her/his wrestling with life-concerns. The invisible culture that is grounded in humanity's *a priori* capacities, which make each individual an *end* and never a mere *means* for other's ends, as well as the invisible moral order of absolute principles that trump self-interest, anchors the individual in a community of understanding and potential encouragement (not heteronomous, moral finger wagging) to live to the fullest one's capacities by cultivating one's creative talents to change the world for good ends. This understanding and encouragement includes, in addition to reminding one of the ineradicable possibility of moral transformation, standing by the individual when s/he has chosen to act contrary to her/his personal self-interest in light of a self-imposed moral principle.

Yet this invisible community can be supplemented by a "visible" institution that is concerned with responding to the needs and sufferings of its members. In other words, *dynamic religion* is no mere reduction of religion *down to imperceptible, individual moral effort*. It involves more than the support of an invisible kingdom of ends. It also includes a community concerned with the physical well-being of its members because there is no exercising of our creative capacities when our physical condition prohibits it. Nonetheless, our responsibility to one another is grounded not in our physical limitations but in our inexhaustible, creative potential that is possessed by every individual regardless of physical or mental challenges. A religious community recognizes that all experience is grounded in lawful orders and capacities not of our creation and that humanity has a responsibility to respond to and to alleviate the suffering of others. Here "suffering" is defined in the broadest of terms because it involves not merely pain and disease but also physical (and economic) restrictions to the cultivation and exercising of individual talents.

What dynamic religion doesn't offer is certainty with respect to the confidence that one's efforts in life will be aided or rewarded by divine intervention or the afterlife. This is not because dynamic religion can prove (any more than static religion can prove) that there is (or is not) such divine assistance or an afterlife. Claims for divine assistance and the afterlife go beyond reason's limits to judge. It is ironic that static religion falsely accuses dynamic religion of elevating reason above God (Karl Barth's assertion about Kant's philosophical theology) when it is static religion that claims to speak from the throne of God. Barth's "Neo-Orthodoxy"

claims to know that there is a reality “beyond” history and to know that the Christ event is not an “historical” event but proleptically anticipates the eternal that is beyond history. This is a convenient strategy to protect God from the messiness of the world and to leave human ingenuity open season with respect to what can be known in this world (including critical, biblical scholarship), but its speculative nature is anchored in claiming to know things that are beyond our limits to know. Furthermore and most significantly, it’s consequences for those capacities that are necessary for humanity to become the moral species that can enhance the world are devastating.

Dynamic religion remains cautious about those things whose judgment would require speaking for God. The questions it asks is not does God intervene in life? or is there an afterlife? Rather, its questions are what would be the consequences for those lawful orders and capacities that are necessary for humanity to experience, understand, and act in the only world it experiences? The answers: 1) Divine intervention and the afterlife serve self-interest, not efforts of understanding and moral improvement. In fact, divine intervention that would violate the laws of nature would discourage efforts to seek greater understanding because we could not be confident that events were governed by a lawful order and the anomalous event that is classified as a divine miracle shuts down effort to try and understand its natural etiology. Nonetheless, dynamic religion does not deny that miracles happen. Rather, it views the entire universe and all of life as a miracle, and takes the lawful orders and capacities of that miracle to be a “divine gift” for humanity to enhance life. 2) Similarly, Kant proposed that any religion that denies the afterlife is no religion. This does not mean that dynamic religion knows that there is an afterlife but, rather, that, given our limitations, to deny or affirm the afterlife would place us on the throne of God far beyond our finite limitations. Although dynamic religion does not deny the afterlife, it asks what constructive function can it play in this life. If the afterlife is not merely to satisfy one’s self-interest in escaping death, then it can serve two purposes: a) to continue one’s moral efforts in this life although the “ways of the world” appear to favor the immoral, the exploiters, the oppressors, and the persecutors; and b) to renew one’s efforts to act on the basis of moral principles, not to earn divine assistance or the afterlife but *to experience the satisfaction of having done one’s best* under whatever circumstances *in this life*. If one’s efforts are supplemented by divine assistance or complemented by eternal life, it would be an unexpected bonus that can in no way compromise one’s worthiness to experience satisfaction over one’s efforts.

Our reflections began with the conundrum that we can’t even define this “thing” that we all experience and immediately recognize: religion. True to Socrates’ elenctic method that demonstrates that our “knowledge” rests upon assumptions because of our inability to define our most basic concepts, we learn that the shift to focus on what is necessary for us to experience and understand instructs us of our autonomous freedom and capacity for virtue. This is the case because: 1) Perception alone doesn’t give us understanding; 2) simply closing our eyes brings

darkness, not natural or innate concepts and laws (symbols) that need to be added to physical phenomena for understanding; 3) what is important about humanity is not what it is by nature but what it can become. Dynamic religion is the facilitator of humanity's realization of its extraordinary, *categorical* capacities. Dynamic religion seeks the enhancement of life and the elevation of all persons above mere animality. We are creative, moral beings not because we must be but because we *can be*.

As a child, we experience the world as a static order meant to serve our self-interested desires simply if we interact with it just like any other animal. In the course of our development, we learn that our inimitability and unrepeatability in the universe is the consequence of the fact that *we can experience* a temporal, physical world only because we possess a set of imperceptible capacities uniquely for ourselves that we must cultivate into capabilities. As an adult, one knows that the world is more a horizon of possibilities that challenges our creative skills to transform and enhance the world than it is a playground of selfishness. At the danger of quoting out of context (but consciously done in the spirit of Herman Waetjen's *The Letter to the Romans: Salvation as Justice and the Deconstruction of Law* [2011]): "When I was a child I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man I put away childish things." (I Corinthians 13:11)