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The Absolute as Ethical Postulate

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Source: *The Philosophical Review*, Sep., 1899, Vol. 8, No. 5 (Sep., 1899), pp. 484-493

Published by: Duke University Press on behalf of *Philosophical Review*

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2176886>

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## THE ABSOLUTE AS ETHICAL POSTULATE.

**M**ETAPHYSIC as a science, says Kant, concerns itself with the problems set by pure reason, namely, God, Freedom, and Immortality. As problems of philosophical enquiry Kant here happily names them in the order of their metaphysical significance. Yet despite the authority of Kant's name, and the traditional clinging to his classification, the problems of Freedom and Immortality are but minor aspects of the central problem of ethics. For, as concrete experiences, Freedom and Immortality are not the condition of the moral function, but the moral function of them. We may accept the facts of our moral experience: we do live *as if* we were free; we do live as if the wages of sin were death. But whether really free or not, destined to eternal life or not, the supreme ethical question is whether and how our life as we live it, our morality as we in our broken fashion construct and evaluate it, has any real significance and value, any justification in ultimate reality. The central problem of ethics, then, stated so as to include its aspects runs: In what kind of world are genuine ideals possible, and how are they fulfilled? Is there a genuine teleological world; what kind of world is it—how does it constitute and contain the reality and significance of our moral experience?

All the spiritualistic philosophies have their several answers to this problem; but it remained for the later idealists of this century to formulate the most consistent, if not the final, metaphysic of teleology. Since Hegel nothing was more natural or easier for the idealists, than harking back to Aristotle, to reconstruct the idea of immanent development in terms of universal consciousness. The world-ground, they say, like the Aristotelian God, is omniscient reason. The universe itself is a spiritual unity—self-created, self-contained, self-developing. Everything lives, moves, and has its being, in the closed circle of one spiritual life. The inherently complete life of the omniscient being is the only truly

teleological world. Physical law and necessity belong only to the broken and external aspects of the universe as we finite, merely self-conscious, beings try to understand and rethink it for our own life ; finality and freedom, on the other hand, belong properly to the universe in its spiritual wholeness, as it is in and for omniscient reason. The truly teleological process, then, as spiritual monism formulates it, is a process which is ever proceeding out of itself and returning into itself—a development universal, immanent, original, spiritual.

It is the virtue of spiritual monism that it conceives the truly teleological world as one which eternally *has* a complete meaning, and that it represents completed meaning under a form of *consciousness* which possesses an original or immediate unity of idea and fact. It is the vice of spiritual monism that, harking back to Aristotle, it uncritically construes teleology in terms of immanent development, at the same time sublimating the idea of completed meaning (for which we shall hereafter use the word ‘finality’) as a category of omniscience. We submit, on the contrary—still aiming at a constructive synthesis in terms of spiritual monism—that the category of finality is neither a category of omniscient reason, nor, again, a category of the merely self-conscious reason in its theoretic or conceptual aspect ; that development, whether physical or moral, has nothing to do either with the concept or with the nature of finality ; and that development, even though sublimated as universal, immanent, and spiritual, does not belong to the universe itself in its conscious completeness.

We are not here concerned with the proof of the being of the Absolute. Our business is, first, to define the general nature of ultimate reality, and, next, to show how the constitution of reality creates the possibility and worth of our ideals, and fulfills them. The general thesis of idealism is that all reality is only as it is for thought, and that ultimate reality is a living whole of experience, spiritual through and through. Following the idealistic analysis of experience, we may say at once that all our knowledge is but knowledge *of* reality, and that reality itself, ‘conforming’ as it does, to our modes of feeling and thinking, is a

world of fact mediated by a system of thought connections, or necessary relations. But since by hypothesis the real world, the world of omniscient reason, is an immediately appreciated whole of experience, the categories of the merely self-conscious reason—the categories of externality, of relation and dependence—are in nowise applicable to the real world as it is in and for itself. The Absolute does not know the meaning of his experience as some “far-off divine event”; its meaning is not given or conceived as *part* of the appreciated content of the divine consciousness; its meaning *is* just the pulsating, appreciated content of omniscience itself. As one in a moment of supreme happiness does not and cannot know that one is happy (because the content of that moment is so absolutely immediate, or is just itself the happiness): so the Absolute, whose experience does not admit of mere mediation does not and cannot know—*i. e.*, represent—his experience as being complete: his experience immediately *is* all that really is.

The unity of experience which the absolute has or enjoys we may symbolize by the unity of the supremely happy moment: it is immediate fulness of conscious content. We, on the other hand, as external spectators, may merely *comment* on reality; the real world must have a definable constitution, must be an appreciated whole of experience. Yet, because the real world, from our conceptual point of view, must be postulated by us as existing completely in and for itself, it is not itself the truly teleological world. The real world does indeed constitute and fulfil ideals. But finality is a category of the human reason; and it is *our* world which is to be discovered *as having*—not as coming to have—a completed meaning.

That ultimate reality shall be at least omniscient is the postulate of the purely speculative reason. Concerned as we have been so far only for the merely logical truth and being of our world, it is enough if ultimate reality be simply a conscious whole; if omniscient reason, like Aristotle's ‘Unmoved Mover,’ be pure intelligence (*νόησις νόησεως*), passionless consciousness and existence (*θεωρία*). But since we know reality only in terms of our own experience, we must represent ‘the fulness of

the Godhead' under the form of our richest and deepest experiences. Our world is not merely a world of *brute* facts which we may merely define or describe in terms of fixed relations; it is also a world of *appreciated* facts, a world of good and evil. The moral reason must make its postulate: Ultimate reality in its highest being must be passionate consciousness, constituting not only all reasons, but also all values. The absolute experience must contain not only the answer to every rational question, but also the fulfilment of all genuine ideals. Yet, on the other hand, because, as by hypothesis, the experience of the Absolute is eternally self-possessed and complete, his world is his eternal choice, and the best of all possible worlds. Here, then, again appears our paradox. How can it be that ideals are genuinely possible and concretely realized in a universe which forever has had a conscious completeness?

Popular theological philosophy noting that organic life, sensitive and conscious, is incomplete, but is always aiming at a definite end and progressing towards it, constructs finality in terms of development, and conceives the teleological or moral world to be one in which sensitive and conscious life is becoming perfected. Cosmic theism, *e. g.*, would, therefore, oppose spiritual monism and deny that genuine ideals are possible in the world of the Absolute. But to this the later idealism replies that the real and significant world-process must be one of which the meaning is originally complete; that, therefore, the ideal or moral order of the universe must not be conceived as an 'evolution,' in the ordinary scientific sense (for the evolutionary process, as a causal process, remains inherently incomplete and insignificant), but as an 'emanation,' *i. e.*, as the self-differentiations of an ultimate identical spiritual essence. This, however, is our commentary on reality: the real world must be a living, spiritual whole. The self-differentiations of the Absolute are not in and for the Absolute categorized or categorizable as either necessary or final. They are simply immediate, absolute experiences. Their real meaning, as in the case of the supremely happy moment, or better, perhaps, as in the case of our deepest æsthetic experiences, is just their factual existence.

Still, it may be submitted that the Absolute's conscious constitution and possession—choice—of just his world marks that world itself at least as the world of genuinely fulfilled ideals. We, of course, in whom reason is so relative, may ask why some other world was not, or might not have been, as significant to the Absolute. Either this is the question why God is God; or it is a question which is based on a false psychology of the relation of the self to his choices. In the first place, we can never ask the ultimate in explanation to explain itself. The Absolute, by definition, *constitutes* reasons and existences. The very factual existence of his world is its reason. In the second place, it is never true in the case of any spiritual being, finite or infinite, that the self exists apart as a mere form of consciousness, contentless. The self is, knows itself, only as the being with this or that conscious content. So, then, if we never know ourselves as mere selves, first existing and then choosing, but only as consciously possessed of an ideal,—*a posteriori* the Absolute whose experience is eternally self-possessed knows himself eternally only *as* the possessor of just *his* world. And because the world of the Absolute is originally experienced as real, all other merely conceivable worlds are originally experienced by omniscient reason as unreal—not experienced at all, not even conceived. We, however, who must conceive of other worlds as abstractly possible, also must conceive and describe the world of the Absolute as the *best* of all possible worlds. But paraphrasing Aristotle's formula for ultimate reality (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι τὸ πρῶτον) the world of the Absolute in and for itself simply *is* what it eternally *was*, the one possible world.

To this eternal world, then, we must appeal for the truth and worth of *our* world and life. But we may not ask why some other world and mode of life, conceivably from the human point of view better than our own, was not more significant to the Absolute, and constituted by him as real, as part of his own experience. We may only ask why our world and mode of life are significant *at all*. If this is a genuinely rational question, the Absolute, as the living spiritual whole of which we are members, has the answer; has it, however, only as the inner fact of his life.

In the Absolute experience as such nothing, exists for a reason, but only *as* conscious reason. It remains, then, the active postulate of our inmost being that the Absolute, as constituting all reason and values, must possess the fulfilled meaning—the worth—of our life precisely as the pulsating content of his own experience. For our life is not something that comes to his. Rather is his life from all eternity in ours : and we in our best and happiest moments, when the harmony of the vision and the will is complete, do but give him back his own,

—“that mind and soul according well  
 May make one music as before  
 But vaster.”

So much, then for the definition of the nature of the Godhead, and for the meaning of our postulate.

In view of all this, let us consider very briefly how and in what degree we are really free and immortal, and how genuine ideals are possible and concretely fulfilled. The Absolute, by hypothesis, is the original constitutive, all-inclusive consciousness. So that at once the Absolute is the active ground of our finite self-consciousness. First, then, our freedom is constituted by our very existence as selves. Psychologically, freedom has not the slightest thing to do with bare, merely conceived, possibilities of action. It has to do only with motives, with living, active ideals. No matter whence or what the data, or the external relations, of the moral life, an ideal in the active sense is always in its essence spiritual. One may submit that our consciousness, whatever its content be, is selective, motor, fatally so. This, however, is not to the point. For the question is not as to whether consciousness is inherently selective, *fatally* motor ; but whether *consciousness* is selective and motor at all. If it is inherently selective, then the personal constitution and establishing of active ideals is insured. And if it is fatally motor the willing moment is purely the content of consciousness ; and since nothing but an ideal can enforce or impede an ideal, one is ‘determined’ by nothing outside of the spiritual circle of one’s being. I am free, then, first of all because I am, and because I look before and after and *know* myself *as* the being with this or that ideal.

Yet, on the other hand, am I free after all, seeing that I came into being from a world, which externally viewed, knows me not, and complicates endlessly my bodily and spiritual life, caring not whence I came or whither I go? I am indeed conscious that I am not a 'thing': and, therefore, I am sure of my freedom in the psychological sense. Further, presupposing that the world which environs me were spiritual, but standing in an *exclusive* relation to myself, I should be all the more sure of my freedom in the psychological sense. For then both the external and the internal determinations of my life are spiritual. That which independently precedes me, and that which follows from me personally, is still in a somewhat broken fashion one chain of spiritual causation. But by hypotheses the life that environs me is *inclusive* of my own, and has from all eternity entered into my own. Now the life of the Absolute is constituted as one of the freedom of reason, because determined by nothing outside of the inner circle of his being—and that circle is all that really is. Fundamentally, then, as the life of the Absolute enters into ours, so the freedom of his life constitutes, enters into, the freedom of our life. But our lives have freedom and spiritual significance only in so far as we choose genuine ideals, only in so far as our morality on its inner side passionately *reaffirms the ideals of the Absolute*. This identity of our moral experience with that of the Absolute, consciously meant by us as such an identity, and appreciated by the Absolute as such an identity, is its eternal and concrete fulfilment.

Yet we must never forget that just because the divine life is in ours, consciously identical *pro tanto* with ours, both private self-realization and self-abnegation logically are unreal ideals. The only genuine ideal is active cooperation on our part with the mind and will of God. The divine mind and the human, as they are logically one mind, are morally one only as they are one will and triumph together. We may and often do create ideals. We can, however, never create genuine ideals; we may only adopt and reaffirm them. So far, then, as we will in our human way that what ought to be alone shall be, so far as we will that the good shall be triumphant, and that evil, though existent, shall be defeated, we are adopting and reaffirming what is the active life of the

Absolute, the eternal triumph of good and the defeat of evil. This is the only genuine moral freedom and fulfilment of human ideals.

As regards immortality we have nothing to offer here but criticism, somewhat negative or agnostic. This is all the more necessary, because the idealists themselves still cling to the traditional conception of immortality, and to the traditional argument for it. This traditional and popularly conceived immortality is but a species of moral longevity. Even the 'eternal life' of the Christian religion, as vulgarly conceived at least, is but a species of deathlessness. It is somewhat nobler than the life of departed spirits in Hades, as the Greeks viewed the life after death, in that it is one of song and praise. But the popular and Christian ideas of immortality have not the slightest *a priori* warrant. The popular demand for immortality is purely a private and special subjective demand. More philosophically conceived, immortality represents the condition of complete moral progress: Only in the eternal life to come shall the effort and pain of our moral life become, in Aristotle's phrase, an *ἐνέργεια ἀνεμπόδιστος*, fully natural and perfect activity. This ideal, while certainly a desirable end, and powerful over the heart and imagination, from the point of view of our postulate, has not the slightest *a priori* warrant. It remains, like the purely homely or popular demand for immortality, simply an ideal powerful over the heart and imagination. We may substantiate our doctrine in very few words.

Some idealists (Professor Royce, *e. g.*, in his *Conception of God*) quite unfairly put the problem of immortality in the form of a paradox. By hypothesis, in and for the Absolute, there are no genuine ideals unfulfilled. Seemingly at death, however, my aim as mine is unfulfilled. I would be perfected, but death apparently destroys my moral ego. On the other hand, from the Absolute point of view, I shall be perfected; but if I shall be, then again my moral ego ceases. It is, seemingly, moral death in any case. I demand immortality, and yet immortality, if insured, shall destroy my demand for eternal life. My full and perfect activity shall cease in a frozen perfection.

We do not hesitate to submit that this way of putting the problem is a *petitio principii*. From the point of view of spiritual

monism finite beings are but partial functions of the Absolute. Fragmentary then, though in their degree real and significant, our selfhood and experience shall remain forever. Our moral experience, we saw, is real and significant in so far as we adopt and reaffirm genuine ideals; namely, the active, passionate content of the life of the Absolute. To be sure, we embody these ideals in a temporal series of outer acts. But what has life or death to do with the *reality* of the embodiment? It is not by what we call moral progress that genuine ideals are fulfilled—for our progress means only that we are repeatedly or in a greater number of situations reaffirming moral reality—but by the fact that we are moral at all, in any moment of time. Death, which is only an external cosmological process, and like any other process, a more or less significant fact to the Absolute, has nothing to do with the significance and reality of our moral experience, as an inner process. The individual's aims, in so far as they are merely his, are forever unreal. But any fragment of genuine moral experience has the only worth it can have in and for the Absolute experience. Whether the individual's days be few, or whether he live again in another world, *he* is just as mortal or immortal as he *can* be, *i. e.*, so far as he, by his active cooperation with the mind and will of God perfects the life of the Absolute. But who the saved shall be passes human ken—Philosophy cannot answer, and the Absolute will not. Yet this is not, as it may appear, a hard doctrine. Rather it calls for the most strenuous endeavor. For the postulate of the moral reason is that the Absolute possesses the meaning of our human life precisely as the appreciated content of his own life, and that his life is perfected thereby. He rejoices in our triumph, and sorrows in our defeat; and that triumph or defeat is eternally his. The truly moral and religious aim of the finite individual is to triumph *with* the Absolute, as one will, in the victory of Good and the defeat of Evil. Our life may be tragical, but only in this way shall it be spiritual. Perchance, too, we may win immortality.

What now, to conclude, is the teleological world? and of what unity of consciousness is finality a constructive category? The truly teleological world, we have said, is one which must be con-

ceived as having, not as coming to have, a completed meaning. We have seen that the teleological world is not the world of the Absolute as such ; for, as the original spiritual whole, his world is not categorized as either necessary or final. Nor is this teleological world our describable world as such ; for it has only an abstract unity, so far as it is thought out, and it is inherently incapable of completed unity. The truly teleological world is constituted by the conscious relation of these two. The truths we know from our incomplete point of view, and the ideals we would embody in our morality, are consciously included in the life of the Absolute as a significant part of his experience. His world and life have eternally fulfilled ours.

Again, from the subjective side, finality is not a category of omniscient reason ; for the Absolute does not think out his experience ; it is eternally self-possessed. Nor is finality a category of the merely self-conscious reason in its theoretic aspect ; for in so far as we think out our experience we do so in terms of necessity. Finality is the category of our inmost being. The moral reason does not merely assert *hypothetically* that our experience must have a moral meaning in virtue of its inclusion in the life of the Absolute ; but it asserts that, in virtue of this relation, our experience *shall* have a moral meaning.

This, then, seems to me to be the truth of Idealism in affirming reality to be a spiritual whole—that in virtue of the conscious inclusion of my life, and all I mean to be, in the life of the Absolute, the moral function with its category of finality transcends mere reason and its system of necessary connections. I feel as free, says Professor James, to throw over a formula which violates my moral demand as one which violates only my demand for uniformity of sequence. Rather, says the idealist, I am inevitably freer to throw over my intellectual formulæ, and to affirm with my inmost being the formulæ of the moral reason.

J. D. LOGAN.