The Awesome Argument for Pan(en)theism

*Project Proposal*

Many pantheists or panentheists have noted that to a significant extent their view of the divine has been motivated by a kind of spiritual experience (e.g., Levine 1994, ch.2). The cosmos just seems to be divine to them, we might say. This project seeks to articulate an experience-based argument of this kind for pantheism or panentheism, drawing on recent work defending a parallel exemplarist approach in the domain of morality. It then teases out the implications of this kind of approach to justifying pantheism or panentheism for the three topics central to the Pantheism and Panentheism Project: the problem of personality, the problem of unity, and the problem of evil.

Exemplarism is a recently (re-)articulated approach to the moral domain that is generating widespread interest (see, e.g., Zagzebski 2017). According to exemplarism, the human emotion of admiration is a fallible guide to moral value. Indeed, moral features, such as the *good life*, *virtues*, or *obligatory actions* can be defined ostensively via direct reference to those for whom admiration survives critical scrutiny. The good life is a life lived by an admirable person, virtues are traits of character we admire in admirable people, and obligatory acts are acts that an admirable person demands of herself and others. Defining these moral features in this way does not reveal the content of the relevant moral concepts, but instead facilitates identification of these features in the real world, which can then itself enable empirical study of their underlying nature. Admiration leads us to exemplars, and by studying these exemplars empirically we can understand what the nature of the good life, virtue, or obligatory action is.

I propose that in similar fashion the emotion of awe is a fallible guide to the spiritual domain—the domain of that which is transcendent or spiritually ultimate or divine. The *divine* can be defined ostensively as that for which awe survives critical scrutiny, and the *spiritual life* can be defined as that life that is a proper response to the *divine*.As with exemplarism, the awe-based approach to the divine doesn’t in providing these definitions seek to identify the content of the relevant concepts, but rather seeks to identify a procedure for discovering their nature. According to the awe-based approach to the divine, following the emotion of awe can lead us to detect divine things, the underlying nature of which we can then seek to understand. Call this awe-based approach to the divine “Awesomeism”

Of special interest to the Pantheism and Panentheism Project is the fact that there is a straightforward route from Awesomeism to pantheism or panentheism. For, when we reflect on the kinds of things for which our awe survives critical scrutiny, they are arguably united in sharing a certain kind of apparently directed complexity. Things as diverse as the mammalian eye or a vast ecological system inspire awe because they involve a diversity of components apparently working in concert toward a valuable end. Divinity, then, at first glance, seems to be a matter of such apparently directly complexity, given Awesomeism. Yet that which most fully exemplifies divinity understood in this way—the most comprehensive, complex and apparently directed entity there is—is the totality of all there is, the cosmos. So, on Awesomeism, that which is most fully or perfectly divine is the cosmos. Call this the Awesome Argument for Pan(en)theism.

Now obviously if the Awesome Argument for Pan(en)theism is to be persuasive, several important questions will need to be addressed at length. For example, what exactly is awe, anyway, and what distinguishes it from other related emotions or orientations like fear, dependence, or worship? Relatedly, why is it awe rather than some other emotion or orientation that we should think is a fallible guide to the transcendent? For that matter, why should we think that any emotion accurately directs us toward the spiritual realm? Further, even if we grant Awesomeism, how strong is the evidence for thinking that the underlying nature of those things for which awe survives critical scrutiny is one of apparently directed complexity? Is it really true that the cosmos exemplifies this feature, and that it is the most comprehensive entity that does so? And finally, if the argument works out, does it favor pantheism and panentheism equally, or one more than the other? A primary focus of my summer research project will be the investigation of these questions. In doing so, I will be guided by relevant philosophical and scientific research on awe (e.g., Ivanhoe 1997, Keltner and Haidt 2003, Krisjánsson forthcoming, Stump 1997, and Wettstein 1997) and on apparently directed complexity (e.g., Lewis and Barnes 2016, Manson 2009).

In the course of my paper, I will explain how the Awesome Argument for Pan(en)theism bears on the three topics central to the Pantheism and Panentheism Project. The first topic is the *problem of personality*. This problem arises because it is insisted by critics of Pan(en)theism that a “concept of God that is non-personal does not seem to be adequate for theological discourse.” However, if Awesomeism is true, then this worry about adequacy loses its force. For, if Awesomeism is true, then the whole purpose of theological discourse is to enable persons to relate appropriately to that which is most perfectly awesome. But it is an open question, not to be decided in advance of sustained inquiry, whether that which is most perfectly awesome is personal. Given Awesomeism, it may very well turn out that the divine is not personal, and so the problem of personality is a pseudo-problem.

The second topic is the *problem of unity*. This problem raises the question of “how the cosmos, which includes an extremely large number of entities, can be considered a single, unified entity that can be described as divine.” The Awesome Argument for Pan(en)theism addresses this question directly. For, if the Awesome Argument for Pan(en)theism is sound, then the kind of unity constitutive of divinity is a unity in apparent purpose for a good end. It is far less controversial that the cosmos exhibits this kind of unity than that it exhibits other kinds of unity that critics have thought may be necessary for divinity. For example, given Awesomeism, there does not have to be a single ontological object composed of the various parts of the cosmos for the cosmos to be divine.

The final topic is the *problem of evil*. This problem raises the question, “How could the cosmos be identical with or be part of God if it contains apparently gratuitous pain and suffering?” It might seem like this question could not present a worry for Pan(en)theists who endorse the Awesome Argument for Pan(en)theism. For, it is not implied by this argument that the divine must be perfectly good, or must not have any bad features. It simply must be awesome, and its awesomeness must consist in its exhibition of apparently directed complexity toward a good end. But still a question about apparently gratuitous evil and suffering remains. The question is: is the evil and suffering that exists necessary for the cosmos to exhibit the apparent directedness toward a good end it exhibits? If the answer is negative, then it may seem that apparently gratuitous evils cannot be part of the object of awe. What is most awesome won’t be the *whole* cosmos, but the whole cosmos *minus* this apparently gratuitous evil and suffering.

In response, I think there is actually greater reason for optimism in the face of this question facing pan(en)theists than there is for optimism in the face of the parallel question facing theists. For, it is typically assumed that for theism to survive in the face of the problem of evil all apparently gratuitous evil and suffering must be justified by outweighingly valuable goods for which this evil and suffering is necessary. But no such strong claim is needed to maintain pan(en)theism if argued for via the Awesome Argument for Pan(en)theism. At most what is necessary is that apparently gratuitous evil and suffering is necessary for the cosmos to exhibit apparent directedness toward a good end. The good end needn’t be an *outweighingly valuable* good end. What ultimately matters given Awesomeism is whether awe for the cosmos as a whole survives critical scrutiny despite the presence of evil and suffering not justified by an outweighingly valuable good. It is at least an open question whether it does, whereas it tends to be treated as a closed question whether theism could be true if evil and suffering were not justified by outweighingly valuable goods.

The Awesome Argument for Pan(en)theism presents a novel take on a motivation for pan(en)theism that has played a central role for many of its adherents. Moreover, it provides an approach to arguing for pan(en)theism that has notable advantages for responding to the problems of personality, unity, and evil. As such its investigation will make a valuable contribution toward the aims of the Pantheism and Panentheism Project.

References

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