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DIVINE ABSENCE AS DIVINE PRESENCE

Introduction

There has been a resurgence of interest in the epistemic foundations of theology due in part to the New Atheist movement and the response of Christian Apologists, a dialectic made present in popular culture through creative works such as *God's Not Dead* and *The God Delusion*. This dialectic is often framed by questions such as "What does it mean to speak of God?" and "How can we know what God is and what God is like?" with the goal of identifying whether God exists. Questions such as these inevitably lead to discussions of whether the Divine is present or absent from the world, and in what sense God may be present or absent to human experience.

The foundations of this dialectic appear to be rooted in opposing views on ontology and epistemology. Due to a combination of historical factors, the epistemology, and ontology of Orthodox Christianity has developed independently from the Roman Catholic and Protestant equivalents that are typically featured in the dialogue between Christian theists and atheists.

The subject of this paper is to explore themes such as speaking of God, the concept of Divine Presence, and the issue of Divine Absence through the tools of Orthodox theology to see what, if anything, Orthodox theology can contribute to the dialogue.

Rather than being an exhaustive treatment of the subject, I will explore briefly the epistemic and ontological presuppositions that both parties traditionally rely on in their reasoning, while highlighting alternative perspectives from Orthodox theology. The primary focus will be on the means of obtaining knowledge of God, and the ways which the divine is present and absent from human experience. Along the way an attempt will be made to highlight correspondences between Orthodox theology and recent philosophical advances.

The ideal outcome would be to demonstrate that Orthodox theology can contribute meaningfully to the discussion and to suggest topics that deserve further research.

Identifying the Source of the Conflict: An Epistemic and Ontological Divide

Broadly speaking, the current theological discourse has increasingly focused around two positions which can be simply labeled "Theistic" and "Non-theistic." While the theistic position is largely represented by theologians and philosophers aligned with Abrahamic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, it should not be interpreted as being exclusive to Abrahamic or even monotheistic belief systems.

When it comes to speaking of God, increasingly, the answer from the New Atheists in regard to questions of the nature of God, and the way in which the divine is present tends to be that God's activities, and attributes are a question for science, as science is invariably our best source of knowledge about the world. Based on this, it has been suggested that it is possible to create a hypothesis and test for God's existence like any other physical phenomena.¹ It is often concluded, that as we have no scientific evidence of God's agency in the world and thus no knowledge of God, we could be justified in believing that God does not exist.² It is further suggested that evolutionary theory in both cosmology and biology fully explain the existence of the universe, and the emergence of complex life, as well as the emergence of religious belief.³

Christian theology on the other hand tends to state that God is the transcendent as well as immaterial cause.

This fundamental difference leads to much of the tension within the dialectic, as the Christian perspective is rooted in an ontology that accepts the existence of immaterial substances, and a metaphysical realm separate, distinct, and in some sense distant from the material universe while the New Atheists reject metaphysics in favor of a materialist or physicalist ontology. To the New Atheist, everything that exists is a material substance.⁴

Turning from ontology to epistemology, it is evident that the Christian position admits a broader theory of knowledge than the New Atheist position, as the New Atheists tend to suggest that only reasoning founded upon evidence from empirical science should be admitted as justified.⁵

This disparity in ontological and epistemic foundations leads to a potentially irreconcilable divide between the two camps which may render dialogue and discourse untenable and all together impossible. It is, as it were, as if each side were playing a different game with language, causing each side to accuse the other of lacking sense when speaking of God.

Speaking of God or Not Speaking of God

The position of the New Atheism that the existence of God is a testable, scientific hypothesis requires first and foremost a definition of what God is, or at least a concept of what God is like and in which way God may exist and act in the world. The issue is first grammatical, and next epistemic, leading us to wonder — how do we know that our definition is accurate? Due to the epistemic commitments of the New Atheist position this would require an empirical observation of God, or at least God-acts, and due to the ontological commitments, it requires that God is a natural being. Ultimately, such commitments lead us down one of two roads: that of arguing a strawman, or that of contradiction.

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Black Swan, 2016), 70.

² *Ibid.*, 73.

³ James E. Taylor, "The New Atheists," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed October 01, 2017, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/n-atheis>.

⁴ Victor J. Stenger, *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2009), 16.

⁵ Massimo Pigliucci, "New Atheism and the Scientific Turn in the Atheism Movement," *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 37, no. 1 (2013): , doi:10.1111/misp.12006.

The most obvious case is that of a strawman; by defining God as a material being with supernatural powers who is present in and limited by the universe like other materials beings is a picture of God to which hardly any theist would subscribe to. Certainly, no Christian would consider this a formal definition of God. The result of this definition is not only disingenuous, it leads to a contradiction, as it is the definition of a God only believed in by atheists. It is further a contradiction because it posits a natural being with supernatural properties. On the one hand, what is the distinction between a natural being with supernatural properties, and a supernatural being? On the other, if a natural being has properties, are they not necessarily natural properties even if they are uncommon or extraordinary?

Ultimately, we end up with a tautology from the attempts to define God; all beings are natural beings. By requiring God to be a natural being who acts in natural ways to avoid contradiction and still satisfy the epistemic and ontological commitments of the New Atheist position, we have entirely excluded any possibility of even calling something supernatural.

The New Atheist might suggest that this is the point; we lack any evidence of supernatural phenomena, as well as the tools to provide evidence for any such phenomena, and in a sort of reduction to absurdity have shown that God is unproven, implausible, and therefore we are justified in stating God is non-existent.

Following Wittgenstein, who in the opening of his *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*⁶ adopted an epistemology similar to the New Atheist position, I find this position to be at best senseless and perhaps all together nonsense.

If we grant this tautology it does not tell us anything about the world or any possible state of affairs in the world, rendering it senseless. Per the *Tractatus*: "The proposition shows what it says, the tautology and the contradiction that they say nothing." Also, "Tautology and contradiction are not pictures of the reality. They present no possible state of affairs."⁷ The meaninglessness of the tautology is plainly shown by the fact that it neither proves nor disproves anything. It only shows that we are either speaking of things beyond the world, or impossible states of affairs that end up being a misuse of language.

Further, there is no reason to treat the tautology as an assertion of an already confirmed proposition, as while we may not be able verify any supernatural phenomena by any empirical observation, by the same logic we cannot disconfirm such phenomena by empirical observation either. At best, it is an argument from induction rather than a true reduction to absurdity which has been set up as a tautology without justification.

⁶ "The world is everything that is the case." Propositions 1 and 2 of the Proposition along with their numbered comments seem to me to be suggesting a serious consideration of the Logical Positivist position that was being advanced by the Vienna Circle and Bertrand Russell, who at first enthusiastically received his work as an affirmation of their perspective. Wittgenstein begins by circumscribing the limits of language by delineating the world as what we can verify to be the case empirically, not unlike the thesis of the New Atheists, who in many respects are the intellectual heirs of the Positivist project. For a discussion of the reception of the *Tractatus*, see: Thomas J. Brommage, "Three Wittgensteins: Interpreting the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*" (2008). Graduate Theses and Dissertations. <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/149>

⁷ Propositions 4.461 and 4.462 from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1933).

More subtly, the concept of the natural is itself either nonsense or tautological as either everything is natural or due to our failing to provide sense for the supernatural, we have also failed to provide sense for the natural.

Turning to the theist position, we must ask ourselves the following question: if God is totally transcendent, how then, can we speak of Divine Presence? Would not a transcendent being be so remote as to be truly absent? This absence could preclude the possibility of divine activity in the world, as God would be far removed from even the affairs of daily life. Likewise, this absence would likely render God unable to speak to humanity due to remoteness. Moreover, in what way can God speak to us when God is wholly unlike us?

This great otherness of the divine creates the possibility for the total absence of knowledge of the divine. Being beyond time and space, the divine is beyond the world. Being beyond the world, the divine transcends even predication.

If then, we admit that God is silent, and so remote as to be absent and inactive, is it not possible that God is simply non-existent? What is the distinction between divine absence and divine non-existence? Where do we draw the line, and how can we know it has not been crossed?

Within Christian theology, the issue of the Divine Absence is traditionally addressed through appeals to God as being immanent or omnipresent and through appeals to omnipotence. God is everywhere and in everything and through His power is able to engage with creation. Through this immanence, the divine is able to engage in self-revelation through and to creation.

The Atheists on the other hand, might suggest that this is not a problem for theology, but rather a problem with theology; that at best it places God in the position of experimental subject through immanence, or depends on unproven metaphysical concepts that have no foundation or basis in science or material reality through the conception of transcendence. At worst, it is contradictory as God is said to be immanent and therefore everywhere, but also transcendent and thus nowhere.

The seeming contradiction between transcendence and immanence forces us to choose one or abandon the God concept. God is either active in the world and therefore in some sense present in the world, or is utterly absent and absence is epistemically equivalent to non-existence as God remains empirically unknown and unverified. As we have seen from the discussion of the New Atheist position, choosing to make God present in the world leads to contradictions or tautologies which render the idea senseless.

Thus, we are faced with being senseless or speaking nonsense,⁸ as that which transcends the world also transcends the bounds of sense. In this conception, a purely transcendent God remains absent as we cannot speak meaningfully about a transcendent God.

⁸ Here I am referring to nonsense in the Wittgenstein-ian sense meaning that we are speaking of things we have failed to define rather than being incoherent. In a sense, they are outside the frame of reference of the world formed by our language and logic.

These unsteady epistemic foundations are precisely what Frederic Nietzsche is critiquing in *The Gay Science* through the monologue delivered by the Madman⁹. The very foundations for our knowledge for God seem to have crumbled under the force of Science and Reason, and yet neither Science nor Reason can in and of themselves provide meaning to life. Nietzsche's prescient declaration of God's death marks the beginning of an intellectual age which would ultimately give birth to the New Atheism.

This age is marked by profound skepticism, relativism, and naturalism, a combination which has challenged the very notion of God and moral value, leaving us to wonder; how can we speak of God at all?

Making Sense

Faced with the choice of being senseless or speaking nonsense, how do we continue to speak of God? Do we even continue to speak of God? Are we forced into a non-cognitivist position where we should simply accept that God is at best ill-defined and therefore not worth speaking of? Should we then withdraw the vocabulary of theology from philosophy?

I do not believe this is necessary. The *Tractatus* begins with a certain narrow and dogmatic view of what the world consists of and what we can speak of meaningfully. There is a great sympathy between the narrow view of the world within the *Tractatus* and the view of the world and meaning that arises from following the epistemic and ontological commitments of the New Atheist position to its logical end. This sympathy can be expressed simply as "all we can really talk about are material objects and facts about those objects."¹⁰

Following this narrow view of the world through to its logical ends, Wittgenstein appears to derive a philosophy of meaning by exploring the use of logic as it relates to words. He treats logic as a language of sorts and through this he discovers the fundamental limitations of language, but also shows there are things beyond those limits and boundaries.

Within this limited language we can discuss various observational facts such as "there is a chair in the corner," or "the temperature of the air outside is 60 degrees Fahrenheit," but we cannot go beyond that to speak of things which cannot be located within the world, such as immaterial transcendent beings. However, in limiting the use of language to withdraw discussions of things beyond the world, we also find that we cannot say things like "the chair is nice" or "it is cold outside." These words do not signify objects or states of affairs; one does not say things like "get the nice off the table," or "can you hand me the cold?"

Perhaps more troublingly, we cannot speak of things like pain or pleasure, vice or virtue. It is possible that we cannot even speak of truth or falsity.¹¹ All value judgements are now devoid of meaning and are thus nonsense. For example, logically, to say "X is Good" would be plain nonsense if we take the

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage, 1974.181-82.

¹⁰ Wittgenstein suggests that all we can really say are the propositions of the natural sciences in Proposition 6.53 from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1933).

¹¹ Proposition 6.52 from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1933).

Tractatus at face value, as there is nothing in the world we can point to as being the referent for Good.¹² We have said something without showing anything about the world. We have failed to give meaning to Good, even if the statement deceptively appears to have the form of a proposition.

Despite this, we cannot deny that we have experiences such as pain or goodness. Good is not a fact of the world, it lies beyond the world as defined, but not as experienced. That there are meaningful experiences beyond the world described by this limited language appears to be self-evident. It seems to me that the only option is to move beyond this limited form of language and the false picture of reality it creates if we hope to remain coherent in our discourse.

How then do we rescue our sense of sense and provide meaning to things beyond the limited world as defined? From within our form of life, whereby our use of language transcends the narrowly defined world of logic and our means of obtaining meaning becomes rooted in our experiences.

For example, I can understand good by being shown good, but I can never be told what good is in any meaningful way without reference to these experiences. Where its meaning lies is in the realm of experiences of goodness, whereby I come to intuit meaning by how the word is used in daily life.¹³ What cannot be said in the narrow view of language taken by the Tractatus is readily shown in daily experience, and the knowledge derived from these experiences is real.¹⁴

Due to the contradictions and limitations of this narrow view of language, I see no way in which propositions the New Atheist position can make sense. It is not possible to speak in theological¹⁵ terms while remaining within the language game that derives from their ontological and epistemic commitments.

Such a game resembles the world of the Tractatus where the concepts of theology and all arguments against God remain non-illuminative nonsense; as terminology that is undefined and undefinable. They are senseless definitions which do not describe any state of affairs in the natural world. For the New Atheist the natural world is the only form of existence, therefore there is nothing theological of which to speak. All that can be said is nothing. "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."¹⁶ With nothing to speak of, there is also no proof or disproof to be had. With nothing said, nothing has been accomplished.

For similar reasons, we cannot use the scientific language game to come to theological conclusions as it lacks the requisite language; we can only do this

¹² Proposition 6.42 from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1933).

¹³ "To imagine a language, is to imagine a form of life." Proposition 11 from Ludwig Wittgenstein and G. E. M. Anscombe, *Philosophical Investigations*; Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. 3rd Ed. with Index (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968).

¹⁴ "Can one learn this knowledge? Yes; some can. Not, however, by taking a course in it, but through 'experience'." *Ibid.*, 227.

¹⁵ In this single instance, let us include ethics and ontology in this category as the tools of both are used within theological arguments by both the Theist and Non-Theist position.

¹⁶ Proposition 7 from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1933).

by playing the theology language game. If then, we wish to speak of God, for the purpose either of proof or disproof, it is necessary to play the language game offered by the theists which is grounded in their form of life for the conversation to have any sense.

Finding Epistemic Common Ground

Adopting the sense of the theological language game allows us to bridge the ontological divide but does not bridge the epistemic divide in any meaningful way. Therefore, it is necessary to find some common ground to show that such adoption is fruitful and potentially meaningful.

I believe that the shortest distance to cover epistemically would be to extend the vocabulary beyond empirical observation to include non-sense perceptions such as intuition. This extension should be generally acceptable as many non-sensory objects are already accepted by science; objects such as numbers, sets, etc. Additionally, both scientists¹⁷ and the New Atheists¹⁸ have relied on thought experiments, and the resulting intuitions to make sense of the natural world. Likewise, philosophy and theology have a rich history of using intuition.

If empirical observations allow natural objects to show themselves to us through sensory means, intuitions are the way in which non-sensory objects become perceptible. The chair manifests to my sense-perceptions, sets manifest to my intuitional perceptions. For the purpose of theological discourse, God may likewise manifest to intuitional perceptions. Revelation is essentially a special case of intuitional manifestation.

Experiencing God's Presence

Within Orthodox Theology, there are many ways in which God may choose to manifest the nature of divinity to us. One of the more systematic presentations comes from Athanasius of Alexandria in his work "On the Incarnation"¹⁹ where he outlines 4 ways in which God may become present:

1. Special Revelation
2. Natural Contemplation
3. Incarnation
4. Pure or Simple Contemplation

Special Revelation can be described as the sending of prophets, because as Athanasius says "Human beings are able to learn from human beings more directly about higher things."²⁰ Athanasius implies that this serves two purposes: first, for those who are able to engage in natural contemplation and receive intuitions of the nature of divinity more directly, and secondly for those who are less prepared to be able to learn something of God through instruction from holy individuals. In essence, Athanasius is suggesting that

¹⁷ The most famous of which perhaps is Albert Einstein's attempt to chase a beam of light.

¹⁸ For example, Daniel Dennett often makes use of he calls "Intuition Pumps."

¹⁹ This schema represents my categorization of the ideas outlined by Athanasius in the section entitled "The Divine Dilemma Regarding Knowledge & Ignorance." Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 73-93.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

special revelation can serve to remind us of God's presence or instruct us in what it means for God to be present.

At first it seems that we are simply leaning on authority as evidence for God. However, these descriptions of experiences which we receive from others help us to clarify and make sense of our own experiences. They act first as arrows and next as signposts, showing us first what may be happening, and then helping us understand when we have found that of which they spoke. Within the Orthodox conception, revelation is can be viewed as a record of divine interactions with humanity that paint a picture of what God is like, which allows us to orient ourselves in a form of life that is open to experiencing God for ourselves.

Regarding instances of special revelation, we need might be tempted to ask things like what it means to say God spoke to Moses. Is it necessarily the case that Moses heard a voice? Returning to our common ground in intuitional experience, it is possible and wholly faithful to the Orthodox theological perspective to say that Moses experienced an intuition of knowledge or information that he perceived as coming from beyond himself which he knew to be from God.

He had an experience of a transcendent reality, which encouraged him to institute a form of life that places humanity in a communal relationship with divinity. In this communal relationship we can say that there is a shared form of life between humanity and divinity. This common life can be called the life of virtue. Insofar as there is a common form of life, the opportunities for communication and understanding increase.

Natural Contemplation is described by Athanasius as the ability to perceive insights about God through the harmony of creation and the providence of the Creator as manifested in it. It is deeply rooted in the sense of awe we feel when reflecting on the world and how or why it is.²¹ Natural Contemplation is in some sense the origin of our modern scientific enterprise. We will pass over it for now simply because it is a large subject unto itself, and much of the content of theology throughout history has focused on this form of insight under the category of natural theology.

The instance of the Incarnation is the most interesting case for two reasons: it finds a way to make the divinity subject to empirical experience, and it is the central event which shapes the Orthodox form of life. Orthodox Theology teaches that God became human to restore humanity to a relationship with God and institute a shared form of life between humanity and divinity. We will largely pass over the exploration of the empirical evidence as this too is a subject worthy of independent treatment.

It is enough to note that Athanasius clearly points to the ability of an incarnate God to reveal Himself; "Once the mind of human beings descended to perceptible things, the Word himself submitted to appear through a body, so that as a human he may bring humans to himself and return their sense perception to himself, and then, by their seeing him as a human being, he

²¹ I am reminded of a correspondence with the thought of Wittgenstein here: "Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystery."

might persuade them through the works he effected that he is not a man only but God and the Word and Wisdom of the true God.²²

Athanasius says again, “But by means of it he made himself visible, remaining in it and doing such works and giving signs which made him known to be no longer a human being but the God Word.²³”

That the Incarnation had an epistemic component by virtue of making God manifest to sense-perception is only part of the way in which the Incarnation was revelatory. With the calling of the Apostles and the instituting of the community of the Church, a form of life was instituted that once again and yet more directly brought humanity into relation with divinity. Athanasius briefly outlines the form of this common life, which is built upon the knowledge of God found in a life of virtue; “the Savior effects such great things every day – drawing to piety, persuading to virtue, teaching about immortality, leading to a desire for heavenly things, revealing the knowledge of the Father”²⁴

Pure or simple contemplation in Orthodox theology is grounded deeply in the recognition that humans are in some sense similar to God and due to this, are able to have intuitive experiences or innate ideas about God. Athanasius describes simply this as a notion of God. Likewise, owing to this similarity it is possible for God to make the nature of divinity manifest to us. Like is able to recognize like. However, this likeness is contingent and made actual through our form of life. Insofar as we are engaged in the life of virtue, we can be said to be like God. The condition called “sin” is the state whereby humans no longer possess this likeness and as such no longer have the ability to recognize God.

This falling away from the virtuous life and the loss of the ability to contemplate God through pure or natural contemplation is ultimately why the Incarnation became necessary – that we might return to the virtuous life and obtain knowledge of God. The ultimate end is that we will be transformed ontologically from a mortal existence to an eternal existence, becoming more like God and therefore growing in our knowledge of God.

Experiencing God’s Absence

Moving from the concept of how we may experience God’s presence, we can identify three types of experiencing the absence of God:

1. Absence owing to the divine transcendence of concepts and predicates
2. Absence as a sense of abandonment
3. Absence of experience of the divine

As previously discussed, God may be experienced as absent largely due to our inability to sufficiently define what we mean when we speak of God. God outside of the special case of the Incarnation is not a fact or a thing in the world we point to, but rather a description of an experience of transcendence. What then do we mean when we speak of transcendence, and how can a

²² Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), 85.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

transcendent being overcome the issue of remoteness? In this instance transcendent is an ontological distinction; God is radically other. It is not a statement of an orientation or location. The experience of the radically other may defy all predication and we may find ourselves lost for words and therefore unable to properly think or speak of God. Paradoxically, the experience of God's presence can lead to an experience of absence.

Gregory of Nazianzus writes, "He extends beyond all our notions of time and nature, and is outlined by the mind alone, but only very dimly and in a limited way – not by things that represent him completely, but by the things that are peripheral to him, as one representation is derived from another to form a kind of singular image of truth: fleeing before it can be mastered, escaping before it can be conceived..."²⁵

For Gregory, this experience is part of the nature of God's self-revealing; God uses this tension between presence and absence to stir up yearning within us that He may draw us nearer. The means of pulling us closer is by making us like God.

"Through wonder might be yearned for all the more, and through our yearning may make us like God; and when we have become this, they he might then associate with us intimately as friends – my words here are rash and daring! – uniting himself with us and making himself known to us as God to gods; perhaps to the same extent that he already knows those who are known by him."²⁶

To be made like God ultimately involves a transformation, first ethically and then ontologically. We participate in the life of virtue and through this become god-like, and becoming god-like are better able to apprehend the mysterious other, who is now less other. Within Orthodox theology, this process can continue throughout eternity as there is still the ontological gulf between created being and uncreated being; it remains an essential feature of Orthodox spiritual life.

Next, there is the sense of absence as seen in the Bible²⁷ and experienced within all forms of human life; the experience of divine absence as abandonment.

We can describe this as sense of forsakenness or separation that takes on an existential character wherein because of suffering, we feel God is absent or due to the perception of God's absence we experience suffering. It is an experience of grasping for God during a time of need and not finding Him.

In the Non-Theist position this experience is sometimes connected to the problem of evil; which stated briefly suggests that the existence of evil or suffering precludes the existence of a good God; therefore, God is evil and unworthy of devotion or is non-existent. An experience of abandonment could be interpreted as evidence for either non-existence or evil and the experience itself arises during times of suffering.

²⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus' Theological Oration 38.

Taken from Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 102.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁷ The Book of Job and the Lamentations of Jeremiah are Biblical examples of grappling with the experience of divine abandonment.

Orthodoxy conceives of God as being radically other; God's thoughts and form of life transcend our own. In light of this, the Orthodox conception of the problem of evil is firmly grounded in accepting the mysteriousness of God's methods while affirming the goodness of God's purpose, which is intuited through the insights of Natural Contemplation.

Owing to this, Orthodox Theology can contribute is a rich theodicy rooted in the concept of human freedom as a primary good. This topic is worthy of much deeper exploration, however at this point our emphasis is primarily epistemological.

To summarize briefly, without the possibility for choosing evil one cannot truly be free. Evil arises from the choices or actions of free agents. Therefore, one cannot have both freedom and an absence of potential evil. However, without freedom, one has been deprived of a good. This also ties into another potential contribution from Orthodox Theology, which is a conception of Salvation as being the transition to a better state both ontologically and ethically; sometimes referred to as a Soul-Making Theodicy.

Salvation entails a change from an inferior state to a superior state, first ethically, then ontologically. To enter into Salvation, we accept that we must engage in a virtuous life striving to eliminate future evil acts while also struggling to make amends for prior evil acts. God's aim is the elimination of even potential evil by the training of ethical agents, while preserving the good of freedom. Finally, there is the Orthodox emphasis on eternal life being the aim and purpose of this life; the change from the ontologically inferior mortal existence to the ontologically superior eternal existence. In comparison to eternity any suffering experienced in this brief life is comparatively nothing²⁸; therefore, God is able to undo and overwhelm the consequences of any amount of evil via the gift of salvation. Infinite goodness will always overcome finite experiences of evil.

Returning to the epistemological character of the experience, what does it say for our knowledge of God? In this regard, it is a special case of "absence of experience of the divine" as the sense of abandonment follows from and is a consequence of experience of the absence of the divine presence.

Finally, we come to another sense in which God is absent; the absence of this experience of divine presence which can be defined as a perception of an absence due to our shared form of human life. We may know from our shared life with others that there is such a thing as God but we have yet to experience it. Longing, resentment and apathy all exist as potential responses, but how do we make sense of this experience of absence of experience?

Experiencing Absence as Presence

Mysteriously, God can speak to us even through absence. Within Orthodox thought, we may interpret this not as a true absence, but as an absent presence which is caused by our radical departure from the virtuous form of life. It is, in essence a divine invitation to enter into presence by manifesting to us stark absence, and a call to participation in the shared form of life which leads to the experience of presence.

²⁸ I am indebted to Fr. Mikhail Ibrahim Hefzallah for this mathematical/theological insight. Division by infinity leads to a dividend of Zero.

This requires a transition from a conceiving of the experience of absence as a true absence. Rather we should conceive of the experience of divine absence as a form of divine presence, albeit at its most remote and transcendent. We have become so unlike God as to be unable to perceive Him except in and through the lives of others. This experience is remedial in nature, beckoning us to participate in the form of life that draws us into relationship with God. It is an invitation to believe, that we may understand.