As I sit here, I’m going to talk about God.

I don’t believe in a supernatural creator, but I’m not an atheist. I do believe in God, a divine being. I think we’re better off thinking of that being as a feature of the natural world, instead of as a separate thing outside the natural world. I don’t really believe in the supernatural. I explained this in my other writings. I can’t rule out the existence of something supernatural, but I see no reason to rule it in either. You don’t have to believe in the supernatural to believe that there is something spiritual. What I do believe is that there is a divine being, and that this being is a feature of the world.

My best estimate of what God is all about is that God is a feature of the natural universe and of things in that universe. I’ve written about this elsewhere, about the details of this concept, about how it can be worked out philosophically. The idea is not new; it has roots at least as far back as ancient Greek philosophy [1]. The basic idea is that God is not a thing, but a feature. This doesn’t mean that God isn’t really anything. It isn’t a way of pushing God aside. It doesn’t mean that God is just nature by another name. It doesn’t mean that God’s existence depends on the physical universe. (I’ll say more about that later.) This idea isn’t a form of atheism in disguise. It’s something else. It’s an idea about the nature of a real God. It just says that God is a feature instead of a thing. That means God is just as real as the mass of the electron, which is a feature; or as love, which a relational feature; or as other constituents of the
world that are not things, but rather features. The statement that God is a feature doesn’t mean that God isn’t real. It just tells us *what kind* of a real item God is.

So that’s what I think about God. My basic concept of the spiritual is that spiritual “things” are features of the world, and not things at all.

Now this concept of the spiritual is consistent with what we know about the human mind. The mind and the self appear to be features of the human brain. My best estimate, which I believe as do some other philosophers and neuroscientists, is that the self or “I” is an abstractum. That is, it’s what philosophers call an abstract entity. In other words, it’s a *feature* of the brain or body.

It’s important to remember that the question of the nature of the human self or person has not been settled. Some people say that the evidence for a materialistic view – where the person is really just a brain and not a separate self or “I” – is overwhelming. Actually it’s not overwhelming. The scientific evidence about the nature of the mind indicates that the mind is an aspect of the functioning of the brain. But that doesn’t mean that there’s not a separate self. We can’t rule out the possibility that there is what philosophers would call a Cartesian ego, in addition to the functioning of the brain. We can’t rule that out using scientific findings alone. There are dualistic views of mind that have not been ruled out. But one plausible answer is that the self is a feature of the brain.

Now that doesn’t mean the self isn’t real. We have to be careful when we’re talking about items being features rather than things. I want to make it clear that this doesn’t mean that the items are not real. Features certainly are real. There’s been a long debate in philosophy about whether abstract items like features – properties and relations and sets and so forth – should be thought of as real, or whether they are not real entities. I’m going to bypass that whole debate and just say that features are not “things,” but nevertheless they are part of reality. If you don’t know that a brick has weight, you don’t know enough about physical reality. Features belong to reality. The question about whether features are real is inspired by the fact that the features
aren’t things – a fact that confuses philosophers and everybody else, and leads them to feel that there’s something less-than-real about features. It’s not that features are unreal; it’s just that they are features – not things. From the standpoint of things, they are “no thing.” But that doesn’t mean that they don’t belong to reality. It doesn’t mean that they are illusory or they aren’t really there.

So features are real. The world is the world of things, events, and features. And God, I suggest, is a feature of the real world, or of something in the real world. A feature of the physical universe or of things in it. Or perhaps a feature of other features – which is my best guess, as I said in my earlier writings. I’ll talk about those details later.

God is a feature of some sort.

Now, if we accept that the self or “I” is a feature, then the idea of God being a feature seems much more plausible. The human spirit, what you could call the human spirit or soul (and by that I don’t mean to presuppose anything supernatural, I just mean your actual self, “you” as opposed to just your brain or body) – the soul is a feature too. A feature of the brain and body, especially of the brain. So when you think of the human spirit as a feature, it doesn’t seem so strange that God would be a feature.

I would suggest that we think of all spiritual items as features. We can think of God as a feature of the world. In my earlier writings I described what kind of feature God could be. God is the feature that we encounter when we encounter the divine in personal poetical experience.

I’m talking about poetical experience here. I’m not talking about any kind of illusory “religious” experience, like thinking you saw a physical devil or heard the devil speak, or saw God in a bodily form when nobody else could, or something like that. I’m talking about something entirely different – an experience of the divine, the sublime, the transcendent, such as poets sometimes experience in regard to nature and love. An experience of the kind that good art can sometimes bring on. These kinds of experiences. You don’t have to be a poet to
experience these things. Various people do have these experiences – the experiences of the transcendent.

These experiences do not prove that there is anything supernatural. However, they do show that the world – including natural objects and people and art and so forth – has features that are not normally acknowledged to be there. The feature of divineness that the poetic mind sometimes finds in things – I would argue that this feature has roughly the same relation to the concept of God that the abstract self, which is a feature of the brain, has to the concept of person. The feature that one finds when one encounters the divine in nature, in love, in art, or wherever one encounters it – that feature of the world is God. Perhaps if I wanted to use a less provocative term, I would call it “the Divine” or “the Transcendent” or “the Sublime.” But in any case, I’m arguing that that is God – an ideal, divine entity. This is not to be confused with the idea of a supernatural creator.

I talked about this in my previous writings. One point that I made is that this feature actually has to be a feature of other features that things have, rather than being just a feature of things. But that’s a detail. It’s explained in my earlier writings. But I would venture a – this is more than a guess – my best estimate of what God is: God is a feature, not a thing. That’s the bottom line.

The human spirit, as I explained earlier, is a feature too. The self, the fundamental self of a person, is a feature. It’s a feature of the brain. You could think of it as being “made of information in the brain,” although a philosopher might roll his eyes at that characterization. “Made of information” is probably an oversimplified way to think of it. But in any case, the self is a feature of the brain.

Now that brings us to the subject of immortality. Most religions believe in the afterlife. Most people think of the afterlife as a matter of a soul indwelling in the body, and leaving the body. In other words, a ghostly or intangible thing leaving the body. Some philosophers have offered a more precise concept, and called it something like a “mental substance” or a “thinking thing”
res cogitans in Latin. Descartes famously used this last phrase.

If the self is an abstraction, and has to do with information in the brain instead of a separate substantial soul, does that mean there’s no soul? Does it mean there can’t be an afterlife? Many scientists have made that argument. They have said an afterlife is illogical and impossible because the mind is a function of the brain. That so-called argument does not hold water at all! Their argument is all wrong. Even if the mind is a function of the brain and the self is a feature of the brain, there still potentially could be an afterlife for the self. It could well be that the same feature crops up in another brain, belongs to another brain, after the brain it started in is dead. That might happen. If the self is some kind of an abstract entity, who’s to say that it isn’t exemplified by another brain later, as well as by a brain now? This can easily happen.

There is a thought experiment about this that I like, and that I’ve used before. Imagine that an artist paints a painting with a particular shade of purple that nobody has used before and that no other object currently has. I’m not saying this really happened; just imagine for a moment that it happened. Now imagine the painting is destroyed in a flood or a fire. Then later the artist does another painting and manages to reproduce the exact same shade. In this scenario, that shade of purple is a feature of material things. It’s a color, which is a feature. That feature belonged to one painting (or part of a painting), and then it didn’t belong to anything for a while. Then later, it belonged to another painting. In between times, it didn’t belong to anything. It existed only as a bare abstraction. It didn’t exist for all practical purposes. You could say it existed only as a possibility if you like, or you can say that it didn’t exist during that time, and then it came to be exemplified later by a physical object.

Whether the color didn’t exist in between times, or whether it existed only in a possible way or only abstractly – that’s not too important. The point is that a feature was had by one thing, then was had by nothing for a while, and then was had by another thing later. And it was the same feature before and after!
If this can happen to a shade of color, then why couldn’t it happen to other features? Why couldn’t it happen to the human self too? If the material substrate of the human self ceases to exist, why can’t some other material substrate have the same self later on? It’s just a matter of the same feature belonging to a different material object.

It could be that by accident or by some sort of law, the self does exist later, after death – in some other brain, or maybe some entirely different system. I’m not saying this happens. I know of no proof that it happens. But I’m saying it’s possible. The standard “scientific” argument – that the mind is a function of the brain – does not rule out an afterlife.

This is the stand I’m taking on the afterlife: that it’s possible that there is one. And what kind of a brain or other device would the self be exemplified in later? Would it be another human brain that happened to resemble the previous one in certain key respects, so it came out as the same person? (Not necessarily with the same memories – the memories might not carry over. There’s an old philosophical debate about whether a person can keep existing without retaining any of the same memories. The answer isn’t obvious. For all we know, there might not have to be a carryover of memories.) The self could end up as a human being. Maybe the self can end up in a nonhuman animal. Maybe it could end up in an intelligent machine, if intelligent machines are going to exist sometime in the future. Maybe there are other life forms elsewhere in the universe. Who knows? I can only begin to speculate about these possibilities. But the important point is that an afterlife is possible in principle.

So far, I’ve painted a picture of a universe which is a universe of things and features, and in which all spiritual entities or spiritual realities are features rather than things. There doesn’t have to be anything supernatural – no supernatural, ghostly things. God is a feature of the physical universe. The human spirit is a feature of the human body. Both of those are real – God and the human spirit. They are not just nothing, and they are not just imaginary. They are real. That’s the picture I have painted so far.
The point is that these two essential truths of religion can be true, even if there is nothing substantial in addition to the physical universe – no extra, ghostly things – and even if nothing disturbs the flow of causality in the physical universe. Even if there are no miraculous interventions that are “miraculous” in the sense of violating known physical laws. I can’t prove there are no law-violating miracles – but you don’t have to believe in these miracles to believe in the two most important ideas of religion, which are: a supreme spiritual reality, and an afterlife of some kind.

I should make a couple of other points here before I go on from these subjects. One point is that not every religion teaches that there is a substantial soul that goes into the afterlife. In Buddhism, it’s understood that there is no substantial soul like that, and there’s no object or ghostly substance that goes over into the afterlife. Instead, there’s some sort of continuity or similarity of features between one life and a subsequent life. And that makes the later life a rebirth, or “reincarnation” as we call it, of the original life. It makes it a continuation of the same person, as it were, even though nothing passes over. The Buddhist view is perfectly compatible with what I am saying here. The Buddhist concept of karma is a separate question – whether karma would carry over from one life to another. I suppose there could be a kind of “karma” if a person’s actions were a result of their own nature. I don’t want to get into that complicated subject here. The question of whether there’s such a thing as karma is a different question. But some sort of rebirth very similar to the Buddhist variety, with no substantial soul, could occur on the basis of the kind of concept of soul that I’m proposing here.

So in a universe of things and features, in which spiritual realities are features instead of things, there wouldn’t have to be anything supernatural. There wouldn’t have to be violations of natural laws. There wouldn’t have to be mysterious nonphysical forces. There wouldn’t have to be ghostly, intangible substances and things. There wouldn’t have to be anything interfering with the flow of causation. By that I mean, for example, there would not have to be some intangible substance controlling the human brain from outside, instead of the brain running itself as scientists think it does. There wouldn’t have to be anything supernatural like that, or any things beyond the physical world. There would just be the physical world including its
features. That might be all there is – and there still could be a God, and there could be a soul that might be immortal!

In a universe like this, people would be more than machines. People would be more than matter. The feature known as the self isn’t a machine, and isn’t matter. It’s a feature of material things, but it’s not made of matter. There could easily be a God and souls in a truly natural universe. And I don’t mean some watered-down version of God or souls – like just being amazed at the wonder of the universe and renaming the universe “God,” as some so-called pantheists do. These concepts I am proposing are not watered-down versions of anything. I’m talking about a real God, who really exists and really is an ideal being. In my ebook God: the Next Version I explained how there could be a being, worthy of our highest love, that is actually a feature of the world, and that is apparent to us in and as the things we love. There could be an actual God worthy of the name “God.” There could be an actual soul, distinct from the body, that might even be immortal. This could all be within the context of the natural world. There’s no need to assume anything supernatural.

Before I go on to other subjects I want to tackle the subject of what this all has to do with science. I’ve been postulating these features of the world. At least some of these features would seem to be beyond science. Behavioral science can study the fact that a human being has a self. That the self is an abstraction – this idea fits comfortably with neuroscience and behavioral science. The ideas that the brain and body are natural systems, that the brain “runs its own show” and doesn’t need an external ghostly soul to run it, and that the soul is an abstraction and in a way is “made of information,” so to speak – those ideas fit comfortably with the scientific view of human nature. With God, the idea is a little more problematical, because a serious question arises: if God is a feature of the natural world, then can science detect God? Can science analyze God? The best answer to these questions is “no – at least not completely.” We might be able to use science to help us understand the concept of God as a feature of the world that constitutes an ideal being. We might be able to shed light on that concept scientifically to some extent. But only the poet can detect that feature in the first place. Only the poet can detect the transcendent and the sublime in the world. By “poet,” of course, I
don’t necessarily mean just a working poet. I mean anyone who has a poetical awareness of things. Without people who have transcendent experiences, we would not even think of this feature. It would never occur to us that this feature exists. We would not think to look for the feature, so science wouldn’t study it. In this instance, science needs poetry to guide it.

(Editor’s Note: The editor has separated the most technical parts of the talk into two “Digressions.” Readers may wish to go back to these after reading the rest of the document.)

**Digression 1: Can science fully understand a God of this sort?**

If scientists did try to analyze this God concept scientifically, what might they be able to accomplish? They might study the behavior of the poet who witnesses the divine, to find out what feature of the world the poet is perceiving when he “perceives God.” If the scientists succeed, they will identify a physical feature of the world. Presumably this will be a combination of simple physical features – perhaps a complicated combination that can only be described with a lengthy description. It could even be what philosophers call a gerrymandered property, with a lot of different possible cases united by the logical operators “and,” “or,” and “if...then...”. But whatever this feature is, it will be only one among many possible physical features, or combinations of simple physical features. Without the poet’s experiences, the scientist would not have known that there was anything special about this combination. The combination would have been only one among very many – perhaps even infinitely many – random combinations of simple physical features. There is nothing in the physical description of the feature that indicates there is anything “divine” about it. Only with the help of the poet’s insight could the scientists know that they are studying divinity itself, and not just one of many arbitrary, potentially boring combinations of simple physical properties. Even if the physical feature they find is not just a combination of simple features, there would be nothing to cue the scientists in to the spiritual, aesthetic, and moral meaning of this property – except the observations of the poets!
At best, science might be able to find a combination of physical features of the world that can plausibly be equated to what the poet is experiencing. But how would science alone be able to distinguish that combination from other combinations? Only transcendent experience can tell us what is very special and important about that property. Science might be able to tell us a lot about this topic, but science can’t do all the explanatory work without input from the poets.

Here’s another problem. Suppose that scientists eventually found a physical feature of the world that seemed to be what triggers transcendent experience. Would that feature really be divineness? Or would it be a physical feature whose presence is a necessary and sufficient condition for the presence of divineness? This is a question that the experiments alone just couldn’t answer. Science combined with philosophical reason might be able to provide an answer, but scientific studies alone could not.

For these two reasons, it appears that science alone cannot fully analyze the feature that is divine. Transcendent experience also needs to be involved – and philosophical reasoning needs to be involved too.

It could even be that there are nonphysical features that emerge from the physical world. This is a complicated question that I don’t want to go into right now. Perhaps it’s possible. Who knows?

End of Digression 1

The idea that God is a feature of the natural world raises various questions. How could God be the creator of the universe then? Wouldn’t a God who is a feature be impersonal and perhaps nonconscious? If God is not literally a person and maybe even is not conscious, then in what sense would God be a supreme being? Could God be worthy of our greatest love? These questions come up when you think of God in those terms, as a feature of our world. I’ve addressed these questions in my writings already, so I will not try too hard to address that here.
I will just summarize what I wrote before; I won’t give all the arguments.

**Digression 2: Some details of what sort of feature God might be**

According to what I wrote in *God: the Next Version*, God is a feature, but is not directly a feature of physical objects or events. Instead, God is a *feature of features* of those objects and events. Features like beauty, truth, and goodness, and also other more specific features like kindness and compassion (which are special cases of goodness and perhaps also of beauty), are *good* features in a broad sense; they are real values. God, as a feature, is a feature that those features have in common. God is the feature of being a real value.

The idea of features having features seems a little bit abstract, but actually it’s very common. You can find examples of features of features by thinking about ordinary features like colors and shapes. For example, some colors are primary colors; these colors (which are features) have the feature of being primary colors. Some shapes (which are features of things) have the feature of being polygon shapes. Logicians call these features of features “second-order properties and relations.” If you know some second-order predicate logic, you’ll be familiar with this idea of features of features.

I would propose that God is a feature of features – and that God is that feature which all features that have true value have in common. This fits comfortably with what some major world religious teachings have said. The New Testament statement that “God is love” [2] is consistent with the idea of God being a feature, and with the idea that God is found in the relationship of love, which is a good feature of the world. In the Hindu scriptures [3], God is described as:

The wisdom of the wise, the intellect  
Of the informed, the greatness of the great,  
The splendor of the splendid.
And again: God is “Wisdom Supreme of what is wise”, “the goodness of the good” [4], and so forth. This sounds a lot like what I’m trying to say here: that God is what the truly valuable features of things have in common. In a sense, you could say God is the essence of value, although that’s too vague a statement to be useful. God is a feature that all truly good features have in common.

End of Digression 2

God is a feature that humans encounter in poetic experiences of the transcendent. However, we don’t just encounter God via these relatively rare experiences. Anything that is good, true or beautiful can give us a glimpse of the transcendent if we are mentally prepared for it.

Now here comes an important point. Poetic perception sometimes reveals a kind of oneness between God and good things in the world. By “good things” I mean not just good things in the moral sense, but beautiful things, and things that reflect truth, and so forth. A nature poet who experiences nature deeply enough may find that all of nature is divine, and that in a certain respect, nature is the Divine Itself. Sometimes a lover will find the divine in the beloved, and will come to see the beloved as transcendent and sublime. Those familiar with romantic and mystical poetry will be able to think of examples. [5]

In my earlier writings I suggested that this oneness is a fact, not a fantasy. It is a fact revealed by transcendent experience. It isn’t that the things are strictly identical with God. I want to add a note of caution here. The idea that all is one, or that everything somehow “is” God, is common in mystical thought. Sometimes people take it to mean that there really is only God, but that conclusion obviously is wrong. Obviously, the things that appear as divine are not just interchangeable with God; they don’t have all the characteristics of God. Instead, the oneness between those things and God is what philosophers call a relation of “loose identity.” It is a relationship of unity that allows God and the good thing to be “the same thing” in some respect, even though the two are not really the same item and are not strictly identical. In nature, one
sometimes finds things that are the same thing in some sense, yet are not strictly identical. (For one example, the young me and the old me are both the same person – me – but they are different from each other in many physical characteristics and even exist at totally separate times. This kind of identity over time, which philosophers have studied extensively, is just one example of a loose identity.) Poetic experience shows that there is a loose identity of some kind between each good thing and the transcendent feature that we call God. Everything that embodies real values is, in a sense, one with God – and, in a way, is God. Such things are not just strictly identical with God; obviously God and the things are not interchangeable. An individual is still an individual, real and distinct; it’s not true to claim that all individuals are only God. Instead, there’s a looser kind of oneness between people or things and God. I explained this in my earlier writings.

If this view of God is right, then statements like “God is love” and “God is truth” can be perfectly right in a way. Also, God can be the creator in a way. God is not a supernatural creator of anything. There is no supernatural creator as far as I know. However, the natural processes (whatever they were) that gave rise to the universe are the source of all good as far as we’re concerned – because without them we’d be nothing! (Of course, these same processes also the source of evil and of morally neutral things – but they also are the source of all good.) The Big Bang, along with whatever natural causes brought it about, is the source of all good! So how can it not be an example of authentic value? The processes that gave rise to the universe stand in a relation of oneness or unity with God – of loose identity with God. So in a way, these processes are God. So God, or something in God, created the universe after all. This view portrays God as the creator, though not in the way that religious dogmatists might have expected.

According to this view, God pervades the universe and is not a separate supernatural thing. At the same time, God is not just identical to the universe. God is not just a name for the totality of things. But in a certain way, God is one with the totality of things. The totality of things – the universe – is the scene of our entire existence. For us it is a necessary condition for all good. So the totality of things stands in the relation of loose identity to God. In that sense, it is
God. The totality of things – the natural physical world – is divine. This view is not just pantheism. It’s not supernatural theism either. I suppose if you had to apply one of the traditional names of religious schools of thought, you could call it “immanentism.” But that doesn’t fully cover it either.

So anyway, these are some of my thoughts about God. If we assume that God is a feature, it’s possible for God to be the creator in a way, even if natural processes created everything. More importantly, it’s possible for God to be the Ideal of the human heart.

A big question remains: would a God who is a feature be a conscious being, or just a nonconscious abstract entity of some kind? It doesn’t seem correct to call a being “God” if that being is not conscious or minded in some way.

We can answer this question by using the concept of loose identity. Once we recognize that God stands in unity with the universe, we can deduce that God is not merely an unconscious what-is-it. At very least, God is in loose identity with persons – and this implies that God contains or encompasses minds and consciousness. In my earlier writings I developed the idea that God is a “mindlike” system, though not a person of the humanoid kind. Philosophers might want to find those writings and look them over. The bottom line is that God is not a “person” of the humanoid, primate sort, but is nonetheless a being that contains conscious processes and has some other properties characteristic of a minded being.

God is not a unique person separate from the universe. What is more important is that God can be a person for you – when you experience the divine in the person of someone you love, during a transcendent experience such as lovers sometimes have.

Another big question is: if God is a feature of the natural world, does that mean that God’s existence depends on the existence of the physical universe? Does it make God a mere side effect of nature? The answer to both of these questions is no. The feature known as God can exist no matter what the universe is like. Even if the natural universe were just empty space,
then for all we know, God still might be a feature of that space. And even if there were no natural universe at all, God still could “exist” in a potential way – in much the same way that a color still exists even if there currently isn’t anything that has that color. Philosophers have debated about the status of abstract entities that aren’t exemplified, but at least it’s clear that there is a potential for such existence – the abstract entity might begin to be exemplified again later. So God has a kind of presence even if there is no natural universe for God to act through and on.

Now let’s talk about other beings besides the sublime itself (also known as “God”) and the human spirit. Let’s talk about some other entities or spiritual realities that religions have postulated over the years.

Let’s talk about angels. And let’s talk about the gods of the polytheistic and pagan religions. Are they real?

I would argue that these figures symbolize something real – but you can’t take them literally.

Let’s talk about angels, and also the gods of the polytheistic religions: that is, beings that allegedly belong to the spiritual realm, and that are sort of subsidiary to the supreme being. First of all, if you take these beings as supernatural beings that flit around and change things in the physical world and cause events that have no natural explanations, then I don’t believe in gods and angels of that kind. But you don’t have to believe in those to believe that the ideas of gods and angels have some truth to them, at least in their main points.

Let’s take gods to begin with: the gods of the polytheistic religions. Polytheistic religions often recognize that their gods are manifestations of the supreme being. This is especially the case in Hinduism. Hindu religious thought tends to treat all the gods as manifestations of one supreme reality. Hinduism is monotheistic but also polytheistic. Other polytheistic religions can be understood this way too.
Think about what this could mean. Let’s start with a specific example, this time from Roman mythology. Let’s think about the great god Neptune – the sea god, king of the sea. King Neptune, also known as Poseidon in Greek mythology, and called by other names in other mythologies, is supposed to be the god of the sea.

If you look at the statues of King Neptune, you will see a bearded man carrying a trident. Now, if you look all over the world and through all the seas and everywhere else, and even in outer space, you will not find a being like that. Nowhere on Earth (or near Earth) will you find a being like that. If that type of being is all you mean by “King Neptune,” then King Neptune doesn’t exist. He’s just a myth, as they say. Just a myth. Of course! We knew that!

But instead of thinking about this mythological figure, let’s think instead about a poet looking out over the sea. In a state of poetic illumination, the poet’s mind is expanded by the overpowering beauty of the sea, and by the indescribable, subtle impressions that the sea can give a receptive observer. The poet experiences the Sea as something remarkable and indescribable – as almost a living presence. Not alive in the biological sense of course, not literally alive (although it does have a lot of living things in it). But the poet experiences a spiritual presence. He experiences the spiritual features of the sea. To the poet, the Sea seems almost like something alive. Strange feelings come from it. It has a strange presence that only a poetically alert mind can detect. The brain of the poetically inclined individual is the only known instrument that can detect this aspect of the sea.

That aspect of the sea is real. It’s not just in the poet’s imagination. The fact that the sea triggered that impression in the poet is a real, physical fact. There is no reason to disregard that impression, or to deny that it reflects something real about the sea, any more than we would disregard the experience of the sea looking green or blue depending on the angle it’s viewed from. We call seeing the color of the sea a “sensation.” We call noticing the deep wonder and aliveness of the sea, with the myriad nuanced impressions that the sea gives us, a “perception” rather than a “sensation.” Seeing the color is what psychologists call a sensation, while seeing the sea as a spiritually rich presence is a perception rather than a sensation. There is no
convincing reason to think this perception is less authentic than a simple sensory experience. The fact that the poet has to be in a certain state of mind to have this perception – that the perception is “in the eye of the beholder” – does not make the perceived features any less real or authentic. The sea has features – properties, attributes – that give it this transcendent aliveness and spiritual depth, which a poet can detect. The things that some poets write down about the sea are attempts to capture these spiritual features of the sea. The sea, like most or all things in the physical world, has spiritual features as well as physical features. I’m not saying the sea has a soul in it, or a mind. I’m just saying that the sea has a spiritual presence – a spiritual aspect to it. It has spiritual properties as well as its physical properties. Poets detect these spiritual properties.

I suggest that the myths of sea gods got started because ancient people perceived the sea as a spiritual presence. They perceived that the sea is something spiritual as well as something physical. Of course, there may be other reasons they believed in sea gods. The psychologists have worked out many mechanisms of the human mind that would make people believe in gods. They say that we are inclined to think dualistically and animistically about natural phenomena. But aside from these sordid reasons, there is a better reason why people believe in sea gods. The better reason is that the sea does, in fact, have spiritual aspects to it. Not a literal, humanoid, supernatural sea god. Just natural spiritual features – features that a poet might well personify as a humanlike god.

So here’s the bottom line. If by “King Neptune” you mean a supernatural being who carries a trident and wears a beard, then there’s no such thing. To the best of our knowledge, there aren’t any supernatural sea gods. But if you claim that there is a spiritual quality connected with the existence of the sea, a spiritual reality or feature that is part of what the sea really is, and that people’s perceptions of this feature probably led them to invent the myth of King Neptune – then you’re talking truth. There is such a feature of the sea.

I used the sea god only as one example. Other nature gods besides the sea god might be interpreted the same way, as mythical figures invented by people who had poetical experiences
of natural phenomena.

I propose that if we interpret the gods of the polytheistic religions in this way, that there may be a factual basis to some traditional ideas about those gods. The gods, as they are portrayed in myth, do not exist. There are no supernatural beings with cat’s heads or tridents or whatever. Those are just symbols – poetical and artistic symbols. But the spiritual features that are the realities behind those symbols – the spiritual features that exist in all of nature – are real. There really is something to the sky besides just matter. There really is something to the earth and in the sea besides just matter. There’s something to fire, and to the wind, besides just matter. Nature contains aesthetic and spiritual qualities, not just commonplace physical qualities. And people make up these fantastic figures to represent these qualities that they feel. We should interpret the fantastic figures of the gods as symbolic rather than as real – but the spiritual features of the world really are there. In this broad sense only, the gods represent reality. (Militant atheists are probably going to misquote me as saying that the gods found in myths are real. I did not say that – and the atheists know I did not say that. Those god-figures are symbols.) Nature is a spiritual system. It’s not only a physical system, it’s a spiritual system too. And there’s nothing supernatural about any of this.

Now I’ll talk about one more thing: the God images of the big monotheistic religions.

Many commentators, talking about the Bible and other monotheistic scriptures, have noticed that the “God” portrayed in those scriptures is not adequate to be regarded as the real God. The scriptures sometimes portray God as cruel, fallible, and all too human. When I say “human” I’m not referring to the ideas of incarnation that exist in Christianity and in Hinduism. That’s a separate issue. I’m talking about the anthropomorphism that’s built into most monotheistic forms of religion.

The God image of the Bible, for example, contains a lot that’s not literally true. However, this God image, which is a creation of people’s minds, can itself be a reflector of the real God – in much the same way that a person you love, or something in nature, can be a reflector of God for
you. A mental picture of God, even if it’s erroneous to some extent or to a great extent, can make God evident to you in the same way. You just have to take the God image poetically instead of literally. If the starry night or the earthly beloved can lead you to an experience of the Divine, then why can’t a mental construct in your brain lead you to an experience of the Divine? I would suggest that the God images of the monotheistic religions are like that. They are human creations, but they nevertheless reflect the true God. They may be 99 percent inaccurate, but the remaining one percent is what really matters.

Now for angels – another feature of the monotheistic religions. If people see an angel, and the experience does something wonderful for them, then no matter what really happened, they probably didn’t really see an external angel. That angel was probably manufactured by their mind; it was imaginary, hallucinatory, or a dream. But why can’t such an internal mental representation of an angel reflect God, in the same way as an external starry night or beloved person might? I mean the real God? “Angel” originally meant “messenger.” Maybe we should think of angels as mental contents that reflect God, instead of as supernatural beings. As such, the angel is a feature of your brain. It’s some information in your mind that acts as a reflector of the Divine.

Now to the idea of incarnation that Christianity and Hinduism have. A person – a human being – can become a reflector of the divine for you, in this same way that I described earlier. This makes a kind of incarnation possible, even though this isn’t really “incarnation” in the usual theological sense of that word. It’s more like what philosophers call “exemplification.” (If God is a feature of features as I proposed earlier, then this would be second-order exemplification – exhibiting a feature that exemplifies God.)

The concept of things exemplifying or reflecting God, and thereby being one with God, is a very important idea in my view of God. It can happen that an entity – which could be a physical thing, an event, or some information in your brain – reflects or exemplifies God. When this happens, you can experience God in and as that entity. This is what I meant before when I said that we can find God in nature or in a beloved person. When that happens, God
stands in a relation of oneness, or loose identity, to the thing that is exemplifying or showing God. This thing may exemplify God, or may exemplify features that in turn exemplify God. I explained this, though perhaps not in the same words, in my earlier writings. [Editor’s note: See the earlier digression on this topic.]

The creation of the universe is a reflector of God. Therefore, God is, in a sense, the creator; the creation happened within God. A God-figure from a religion can be a reflector of God for you, even if that God-figure is a creation of the human mind – or is “only a myth” as they say. A romantic partner, a lover, can be a reflector of God for you, and therefore can be divine from your vantage point. Some romantic poets have known this for a long time! And as nature mystics know, things in nature can be reflectors of the Divine, lending some truth to the philosophy of pantheism.

Anything that is a reflector, in this sense, of the feature we call “God” or “the Divine,” and that shows forth that feature, stands in a relation of oneness with God, and in a sense is God – although it’s not just exactly the same as God. The relationship is a loose kind of oneness. I talked about this earlier. It’s what philosophers call “loose identity.” It does not mean that the two things that are the same are exactly the same, or that one of them isn’t really there, or that they are interchangeable. Instead, they are unified with each other in a more nuanced way.

I think I’ve pretty well covered the territory here. There are these various spiritual features of the world. The religions believe mostly in symbolic depictions of these realities, with a lot of added stuff, superstitions, and outdated ideas thrown in. But the basic ideas of the religions have a basis in fact. There really is a supreme spiritual reality worthy of our highest love. It isn’t like the humanoid God image of some religions, and it isn’t supernatural, but it exists. There really is something to us besides just our bodies – though that “something” is not a supernatural substance. A person is not just a body. A person is something more – and potentially even has life after this life. There are features of nature that manifest the divineness or sublimity of the supreme spiritual reality. These features are very different from the mythical images of angels and gods, but the features are real nonetheless. And there is the possibility of
an individual coming to stand in a special relation to the supreme spiritual reality, a relation that one could call a relation of “incarnation” if one wanted to stretch the meaning of that word. So all the main basic truths of the world’s major religions are right – though not in the way that people normally understand them. The reality is different from what people usually believe in. The religions get a lot of things wrong. But what do you expect? The human race is trying to understand the Divine, and that’s a hard job!

Religious leaders often don’t understand how hard that job is. They act as if they can understand God easily. Actually it’s very, very hard. Concepts like God, creation, afterlife, soul, and angels; the idea that God is love; the idea that God is somehow the supreme good and the ideal of the heart – all these ideas contain big grains of truth if the theory of spirit that I am suggesting is correct. All these ideas are within the province of reason – philosophical reason, not scientific reason acting alone; philosophical reason applied to our poetical experiences of the sublime. That’s the source of real religious knowledge. Philosophical reason applied to experiences of the sublime yields spiritual knowledge – what could be called “religion” in a nonsectarian, non-dogmatic sense. This kind of religion is not just a simplistic pantheism in which nature is equated to God without caution or reservations – but it is a naturalistic view of spirit.

Now a big question here, which I took up earlier and didn’t finish taking up, is this: if God is a feature of nature, then can science analyze and understand God? Before I answer this, I’d like to point out a couple of things. First of all, the mere fact that a feature of the world is natural does not imply that science can detect that feature. The fields of knowledge that we call “science” proceed by analyzing the information that we get from the senses. As I explained before, the sublime and transcendent experiences that underlie religious knowledge are not sense knowledge. They are the results of perceptions that go beyond mere sensation. I do not mean to imply that there’s anything extrasensory or spooky about these experiences. It’s just that these experiences happen only when the brain processes sensory information more extensively than it does for mere sensation. The poetical experiences are not just sense experiences. In psychological terms, they are perceptions, not merely sensations – and
perceptions of a rather sophisticated, highly processed kind. I hesitate to call them “intuition,” because “intuition” is a word that means many different things to different people. It’s a confusing word. But poetic or artistic perception of the world gives us real information about the world. Does it disclose properties that can’t be detected by science? That’s a big question. Could it be that a property like divineness cannot be detected by science, even though it’s a feature of the natural world and is not supernatural? I would suggest that the answer is yes. Also, I would suggest something more: that even if a feature appears in the world as a result of matter being in the right configuration – even if the feature “emerges” from matter, as philosophers put it – that the feature might still have a reality distinct from the reality of matter.

The natural world might have features that are not detectable by science. In principle, there’s nothing wrong with that idea. Even in an extreme scenario, if it turns out that the feature we call divineness is analyzable into some combination of simple physical features of the world, that still wouldn’t mean that science alone could fully understand divineness. [Editor’s note: This question is covered in an earlier digression.] It’s possible that science can tell us something about God, given that people already have a way of knowing about God. Science could at least tell us about the experiences by which we know God, once we’ve agreed that we are knowing God through certain experiences. And that last part is the part that science can’t really tell. That’s really up to the human brain – the poet’s brain – to decide.

I’ve been a bit roundabout here, but what I’m saying boils down to this: to have a fully scientific account of God without poetic experience playing any role in it, we would have to decide scientifically that divinity is a feature that emerges from the physical world, and more importantly we would have to decide which physical feature of the world it is. If we developed a description like that, it would have to be developed with the help of means outside of science. Why? Because without poetry and poetic experiences, we would never even think of the possibility that there’s something like the sublime or the transcendent. It would never occur to us. If some science-minded robot with no feelings were to examine the matter of the universe, there’s no reason that this robot would ever think of the concept of the transcendent or the sublime. It is the poetically inclined human mind that thinks of that.
Thus, science *acting alone* – science as we know it, based on the logical analysis of sense experience – can never discover the divine. The divine remains within the scope of philosophy instead of science, because science alone can’t even detect that divinity is there. On the other hand, if we assume that we do have knowledge of the divine, which is a philosophical conclusion, then we can study scientifically the human behavior surrounding those experiences – including what people say they learn from those experiences. Then we might be able to draw some conclusions about God using scientific methods. But we can do this only if we already have assumed that certain experiences really are experiences of the divine. So, we need the philosophy and poetry to begin with. Then once we have established the existence of God and determined which experiences really are experiences that reveal God, then we can begin to think about using science to illuminate those experiences.

So, the answer to the question “if God is natural, then does that imply that science can tell us all we need to know about God?” – the answer is no. Science cannot tell us all we need to know about God. It can’t even tell us there is a God. But once we have established there is a God by poetic and philosophical means, then science can certainly shed some further light on the question of God. So if we ask whether this naturalistic view of God puts God under the authority of science, the answer is no. God still is a philosophical concept and a poetical concept. However, the view of God I have presented here does point to ways that science might useful in telling us something about God. Science might be usable for that purpose.

I have said most of what I want to say here – maybe a little more. I think I’ve covered the main points of my view of religion.

--- *End of Talk* ---

Reference notes for this talk begin on the next page.
Notes

[1] Plato regarded the ideal being (“Form of the Good”) and the human soul as something like what today’s philosophers call “abstract entities.” This is a clear precedent for the view that God is a feature of the world.


[5] One fine example is the *Tarjumân al-Ashwâq* of Ibn Arabi, a great Sufi mystic.

Further Reading

Many of the ideas in this talk are presented more carefully and systematically in Dr. Sharlow’s writings. Those who wish to read further should consult his website *Brain, Time and Cosmos* (<http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow>, accessed 5/23/2012). A good starting point is the “Philosophy of Religion” section of the guide document located at <http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/guide.pdf>. Many of Dr. Sharlow’s works also are in the PhilPapers directory and archive at http://philpapers.org.

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