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# Seeking God's help is rational since the human condition is desperate

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**Abstract.** The paper argues for God as the rational object of our desire and action, with respect to help-seeking. I begin by characterizing the desperate situation as one that is very bad in ways that are beyond one's control. Knowing that one's situation is desperate, it is rational to feel desperation about it. Desperation, I argue, involves an impulse to seek help; to find and entreat a helper. So, feeling and expressing that impulse in a desperate situation is rational. The human condition itself seems to be desperate, due to things like our mortality, fragile well-being, and philosophical ignorance. So, it is rational to feel desperate about the human condition and to seek help regarding it. I argue that God is the best target of that impulse, arguing from common consent, by showing that God best satisfies the criteria for a helper, and from a Neo-Platonic conception of God as the cause of all help.

**Keywords:** Desperation, Philosophy of Emotion, Philosophy of Religion

**Contribution.** Philosophy of religion focuses on God as an object of belief, this paper shifts the attention to God as an object of desire. The literature discusses God's emotional life (or lack thereof), this paper addresses the place that God should have in our emotional lives, providing a formal analysis of desperation. The paper melds empirical research and Neo-Platonic metaphysics to justify a form of non-doxastic religious engagement.

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## Introduction

Contemporary philosophy of religion focuses primarily on the rationality of beliefs about God. Yet, much of the religious sensibility involves encountering God under the guise of the good, as an object of desire, as well as the guise of the true, as an object of belief. I argue that a desire to seek God's help is rational given the desperateness of the human condition. The argument is:

1. Desperation involves seeking help.
2. It is rational to feel desperation about the human condition.

Therefore, 3. Seeking help about the human condition is rational.

4. Seeking God's help about the human condition is rational.

In each premise 'rational' is used in an epistemic sense (rational, given the best available evidence). Desperation is epistemically rational; as truth-oriented beings, the desperateness of our situation merits that we recognize this by experiencing the emotion of desperation. In turn, as the desire to seek help is to desperation as a part to a whole, that desire is epistemically rational. So, in having that desire, in reflectively endorsing it, in attempting to satisfy it, one cannot be accused of wish fulfillment or avoidant coping. It is *also* rational to seek God's help in the practical sense, as good-oriented beings. We maximize expected utility by entreating God rather than not. However, whereas Pascal's Wager is based purely in practical rationality (Pascal 1900, sec. 233) – that certain attitudes and behaviors maximize expected utility even if they are epistemically non-rational or irrational – I argue for the epistemic rationality of the emotion of desperation and the desire to seek help that it contains. In each premise, 'rational' is used in the sense of requirement rather than permission. So, even for atheists and agnostics, the possibility of relationship to God is always open and urgent.

I note two payoffs of the argument for extant philosophical debates. First, if we have reason to seek God's help, then we have reason to engage in help-seeking activities, most obviously petitionary prayer. Depending on one's theology, other activities that might fall in this category include repentance, good works, and ritual participation. Since my argument applies to atheists and agnostics, it provides a justification for non-doxastic religiosity (Palmqvist 2022; Mawson 2010). Second, if we have all been provided with a rational impulse to seek God as a helper, then non-culpable non-belief (or, the absence of relationship with God) may be rarer than it seems (Schellenberg 1996) – on the one hand because more may have acted on this impulse than we imagine, and on the other because those who have not would count as culpable.

## 1. Desperation involves seeking help

### 1.1. The desperate

I characterize the desperate, the formal object which properly elicits the emotion of desperation, the shared pattern that makes desperate situations desperate, the way a situation must be for an episode of desperation to align with reality.

(i) Axiologically, a situation is desperate for an agent only if it is very bad for them; it involves a severe loss, or frustration of gain, in well-being or other value. That you are a little hungry does not make your situation desperate, that you are starving does. The worse the situation, the more desperate. This distinguishes desperation from attitudes that are specifically normative such as anger and guilt, the positive evaluations of attitudes like delight, and the weaker negative evaluations of attitudes like irritation or annoyance.

(ii) Agentially, a situation is only desperate for an agent if that agent has no control over what makes it very bad, or only a very unreliable control. A Wild-West gunfight between two outlaws is very bad, in its danger, for both. Yet, it is only when one outlaw runs out of ammunition and is cornered by the other that his situation becomes desperate. The less the agent's control, the more desperate their situation. Lack of control distin-

guishes the desperate situation from, for example, tragic or contemptible situations in which an agent unwittingly or wittingly neglects to exercise control.

(iii) Temporally, a situation can be desperate in virtue of things in the present or the future. It is not rational to feel desperation about World War 1, but it is rational to feel desperation about your cancer diagnosis, or the prospect of being evicted from your apartment next month. The closer in time the very bad thing, the more desperate the situation. Nevertheless, a situation can be desperate in virtue of things in the distant future. If at age 30 I learn that by age 40 I will be showing symptoms of an untreatable genetic disease then my situation is desperate, and becomes more desperate as I approach 40. This temporal orientation distinguishes the desperate from the disappointing, focused on the past, or the panic that focuses on the present, or the anxiety that focuses on mere possibilities.

(iv) Probabilistically, a situation is only desperate in virtue of very bad things in the future if their occurrence is at least quite likely (a deliberately vague statement). That there is a low likelihood that I will be struck by lightning does not make my situation desperate, but if it is quite likely that my chemotherapy will be ineffective then my situation is desperate. The more probable the occurrence of the very bad thing, the more desperate the situation. This distinguishes the desperate from the fearful, which can cover things that are quite unlikely, and the doomed, which covers only certainties.

I propose that these conditions are individually necessary, and jointly sufficient, for a situation to be desperate. So, for example, if you have a high degree of control over your situation, then it is not desperate despite the other conditions being met. I generated this characterization using the method of division, introducing subsequent conditions in response to intuitive counterexamples (i.e., a desperate situation is very bad, but not every very bad situation is desperate, only those beyond an agent's control, but not every very bad situation beyond an agent's control is desperate, only those in the present or future, etc.) So, I invite the reader to test its adequacy by considering whether the characterization fails to capture cases that are desperate, or captures cases that are not desperate.

A single psychology article focuses on desperation as such. It devises a psychological scale for measuring desperation. The items it includes mesh well with the conditions I have offered, respectively, (i) "I feel as though I need to act," (ii) "I feel as though I have no control" (iii) "I feel as though I have to act quickly," (iv) "I feel hopeless," and "I feel as though I need help" (Hannan and Hackathorn 2022, 11).[1]

### 1.2. Seeking help

Desperation involves the desire to seek help. This desire is a necessary, constitutive, part of desperation. Someone who lacks a desire to seek help fails to count as feeling desperation. To seek help is to try to communicate a request to a person, that they act to alleviate something bad about our situation; soliciting someone to exercise the control that we lack, or to augment our control. For example, the desperate outlaw might cry out for the sheriff's intervention, or beg the saloon's piano player to toss him a pistol. Put otherwise, desperation involves helplessness, the felt absence of help, that help is needed and must be sought. Here are four reasons for thinking that desperation involves the desire to seek help.

First, given that we are social creatures, and creatures with levels of well-being that can be affected by the actions of others, there is a high prior plausibility to the claim that we would have an emotion that involves a desire to seek help, just as we have other emotions that help us navigate other socially-inflected aspects of our existence, such as admiration or embarrassment. Given that the desperate situation is a situation involving something bad over which the agent lacks control, but which might be controllable for another, desperation is an eminently plausible candidate for an emotion that would involve a desire to seek help. That

[1] A reviewer expresses the wish that I use more empirical research to inform my characterization of desperation. I share this wish, but beyond the paper I have cited such research is not extant. There are large literatures on adjacent phenomena like fear, anxiety, hopelessness, etc., but these are not helpful in individuating conditions for what seems to be "a distinct emotion" (Hannan and Hackathorn 2022, 9). I note that there are many cases in which philosophers give 'a priori' characterizations of emotions, just as competent users of the concept, e.g. anger, vanity, gratitude (Aristotle 1991, 1378a 31; A. Smith 2002, III.II.IV; Roberts 2004).

is, a desire to seek help would be intelligible in light of the desperate as a formal object. By analogy, anger's desire to punish clearly coheres with the formal object of anger (wrongdoing).

Second, seeking help is the only way in which the conative aspect of desperation can be rationally expressed. The desperate person is active; they have the impulse to do something about their situation, since it is very bad. When we feel our situation to be desperate, we may try to escape from it, or try to exercise control over it – e.g., the cornered outlaw might hammer his fists on the walls that hem him in, or lunge for his opponent's weapon. Though these types of activities are understandable, they are not rational. Actions aim at goods. These actions are futile since, *ex hypothesi*, the desperate person lacks the ability to improve their situation. Desperation is, loosely speaking, paradoxical because it urges us to do something precisely when we can do nothing, to achieve the unachievable. Seeking help resolves this paradox; we cannot control the situation, but if it is controllable for another, then we can strive toward the good through and with them. One could conclude, instead, that desperation is a tragic emotion, that its conative impulses have no rational outlet. Although I see nothing impossible in this, it is more plausible that our emotions have a basic functionality to them.

Third, it seems that people in desperate situations often seek help. The person suffering a crisis goes to therapy. The person needing expensive medical treatment solicits donations. The person going hungry registers at a food bank. These observations are explained simply by the claim that desperation involves the desire to seek help. Unfortunately, there is no extant empirical research on the association between desperation (conceptualized and measured as desperation as such, using a psychological scale) and help-seeking behaviors. Nevertheless, it seems to be a commonly accepted folk-psychological explanation of help-seeking behavior that it can be motivated by desperation. "I was desperate, so I sought help" makes sense in the way that "I was angry at her, so I lashed out at her" makes sense. It is not a *non sequitur* like "I was envious of her, so I wanted to spend time with her." Such explanations depend on the idea that desperation involves a desire to seek help.

Fourth, everyday moral feelings involve the notion that desperation merits the seeking and offering of help. When we seek help, we may excuse ourselves from the imposition that we make on others by explaining that we are desperate. Again, learning that someone is desperate provides special reason to help them. The person who fails to seek or offer help in response to desperation lacks a shade in their palette of moral sentiments. Note that it is not just that a situation is desperate that provides ethical reason to seek and offer help, but that someone is experiencing desperation. That someone is desperate provides special reason to offer help, which only makes sense if desperation involves helplessness, a felt-dependency on the assistance of others. Lastly, consider the phenomenon of vicarious or sympathetic desperation. Seeing a baby-stroller careen toward you down the hill, you rightly enter into the desperation of the parents; you feel their desperation even though the situation is not very bad for you or uncontrollable for you. In such a situation, you feel their helplessness and respond to it with help.

## 2. It is rational to feel desperation about the human condition

Emotions are evaluable, in terms of epistemic rationality, under both their cognitive aspect (mind-to-world direction of fit, presenting something as being the case) and conative aspect (world-to-mind direction of fit, presenting something attractively or aversively). For example, roughly, fear presents something as dangerous and good-to-flee-from. So, whether the presence or absence of an emotion is epistemically rational depends on the best available evidence about the corresponding presence or absence of its formal object (the fearful, the shameful, the joyful, etc.). If I fear a golden retriever, tail-wagging, hand-licking, my fear is irrational because it baselessly presents my situation as dangerous and good-to-flee-from. If I do not fear a pit bull, hackles raised, barking gutturally, then I do so irrationally, my affective faculties fail to respond to the obvious presence of the fearful. False positives and false negatives in our emotional life are irrational in the same way that it is irrational to believe obvious falsehoods or fail to believe obvious truths.

I briefly describe three things about the human condition that are *prima facie* desperate: mortality, fragile well-being, and philosophical ignorance. These do not pertain to every conceivable human being, but to human beings as we have thus far existed.

(a) Our mortality is desperate. That you will die is very bad for you, you have little ability to avoid it, it will happen in the future, and it is very probable. Your situation is desperate not just because you will die but because those that you love will die. So, even granting the Epicurean argument that my death is not bad for me (Luper 2019), the prospect of my death is nevertheless very bad for those who love me, which makes their situation desperate, and the prospect of the deaths of those I love is very bad for me, which makes my situation desperate. That death is not necessarily bad, e.g., after having lived a few millennia, would not undermine the claim that the deaths that we will die make the human condition desperate.

(b) The fragility of our well-being is desperate. Consider things like serious physical or mental illness, a frustrated career, business failure, unsatisfying work, miscarriage, infidelity, divorce, heartbreak, domestic abuse, bereavement, loneliness, being the victim of a serious crime, etc. Each of these severely impair well-being. Beyond what will actually befall us, our well-being is fragile in that it is exposed to a realistic possibility of severe impairment in one or more of these ways. This fragility itself is very bad.

We have some control over the occurrence of some of these ills, e.g., whether one will be paralyzed in a motorcycle crash. Yet, nobody is able to control all of the ways in which their well-being is exposed to the realistic chance of severe impairment. Some people have a much lower risk of specific types of severe harm than others. Most readers of this article do not have a realistic chance of being among the roughly 1.5 million who die from tuberculosis annually (WHO 2021). Yet, even those born in relative good fortune face realistic risks of severe harm. Consider some statistics from the United Kingdom:

– 6% of children experience serious neglect, 16% sexual abuse (May-Chahal and Cawson 2005)

- 33% of marriages will end in divorce (Yurday 2022)
- 28% will suffer a mood disorder such as a depressive episode (D. J. Smith et al. 2013)
- 32% will develop dementia (Lewis 2015)
- At a time, 6% experience severe loneliness (Victor and Yang 2012)
- At a time, 10-14% experience moderate or severe chronic pain (Fayaz et al. 2016).

Someone who slips past these evils does so by sheer fortune; they were exposed and defenceless to the realistic possibility of their realization, and so their condition was desperate.

(c) Our philosophical ignorance is desperate. Consider some of the big philosophical questions. What is the right way to live, if there is one? Am "I" a soul, an animal, a bundle of psychological states? Can I act freely? Some social epistemologists argue that the reasonable disagreement of philosophers concerning such questions show that none of us really know the answers (Christensen 2009). Again, given the number of these questions and the range of available answers, the probability that you know the answers to more than a few of these questions is extremely low. If you do know the answers, you will have to conclude that most other people do not. It seems very bad that we are ignorant about these matters, that we can do little to remedy even small portions of our philosophical ignorance. This makes the human condition desperate.[2]

Plausibly, many other things about the human condition are desperate: that we never really know the thoughts of others, that our characters are shaped by many arbitrary factors, that our characters are infected with vice, that we do not choose to exist, that we are unable to foresee or control the innumerable causal consequences of our actions.

The formal object of desperation, the desperate, is embodied in our mortality, fragility, and ignorance, in fundamental facets of our lives.

[2] Perhaps the claim that philosophical ignorance is desperate is parochial. However, it seems that much of the psychological appeal of religion is in its purported answers to these questions (Taves, Asprem, and Ihm 2018). Again, the experience of existential anxiety (van Bruggen et al. 2015) or existential crisis (Butėnaitė; Sondaitė and Mockus 2016) consists in part in the disorienting felt loss of understanding about these matters. Perhaps we find it hard to seriously entertain the fact that we are philosophically ignorant.

So, it is rational to feel desperate about our existential situation. Were someone to not feel desperation about the human condition they would be suffering an affective blindness, they would be failing to detect an important evaluative dimension of their situation. In turn, since desperation involves a desire to seek help, we ought to search after and entreat a helper. If the whole is rational, then the parts are rational. Since the emotion is rational, its conative parts are rational.

## 3. Seeking God's help about the human condition is rational

Touring the Norwegian fjords, you fall overboard a foot-passenger ferry. You see some of the passengers' faces curling in horror, as you desperately scream and wave toward them. You are scooped up from behind by a passing fisherman. In one sense, you were seeking help from the people on the ferry – your communicative efforts were directed toward them, locking gazes with one passenger you were seeking *their* help. In another sense, you were seeking anyone's help – your screams and waves were a message sent to anyone who might be there to receive it. Had the thought occurred to you that there might be a vessel behind you, you would have looked for it, waved at it.

To say that it is rational, epistemically and practically, to seek God's help for the human condition is to say that help-seeking efforts are best focused on God, just as screaming at the passengers best comported with your understanding of your situation and was your best bet, but it is not to say that no other being could possibly help. Seeking help can be divided into the investigative exercise of finding potential helpers and the demonstrative, interpersonal, exercise of entreating potential helpers. These two are merged in the scream.

I now offer three arguments for the claim that God is the rational target for help-seeking *vis-à-vis* the human condition. The first and second arguments do not hinge on a specific conception of God such as classical theism, open theism, etc., The third argument rests on a conception of God as the cause of the world, and some broadly Neo-Platonic metaphysics.

### 3.1. Common consent

Consider these psycho-social findings. Higher levels of religiosity and religious behaviors (praying, seeking spiritual advice, attending church, viewing life-events in a religious frame, religious altruism) correlate with:

- Economic deprivation (Theodorou 2015)
- A standardized "suffering index" capturing factors such as incidence of infectious disease, violent crime, environmental pathogens (Gray and Wegner 2010)
- Experience of war (Shai 2022)
- Being diagnosed with HIV (Ebotabe Arrey et al. 2016)
- Being reminded of one's mortality (Vail, Arndt, and Abdollahi 2012)

In different cases we might propose different causal mechanisms (e.g., *Terror Management Theory* in the cases of war and mortality salience, *Just World Bias* in the case of economic deprivation). Whatever the exact psychological mechanism, in each case being in a desperate situation is associated with increased religiosity. Likewise, under the term "religious coping," it has been found that religious attitudes and behaviors are commonly used to navigate desperate situations, such as:

- The death of a friend (Park and Cohen 1993)
- Infertility (Greil et al. 1989)
- Disability (Specht et al. 2005)
- Mental illness (Rogers et al. 2002)
- The care of a family member with dementia (Wright, Pratt, and Schmall 1985)
- The care of a disabled child (Bennett, Deluca, and Allen 1995)
- A child's cancer journey (Spilka, Zwartjes, and Zwartjes 1991)
- Pandemics (Bentzen 2020)

There is strong empirical evidence that when people are desperate they have a stronger tendency to seek God's help. This is no *proof* that God is the rational target of the desire to seek help concerning the human condition: the actual is not always the rational, our natural instincts are sometime irrational, the attitudes of the majority are sometimes mistaken.

Yet, the empirical data is some evidence. Minds are broadly reliable attitude-formers, so that they tend to form a particular attitude in a particular situation is *prima facie* evidence that doing so is rational (Zagzebski 2011). For example, the observation that people tend to be angry at those who have wronged them is evidence that the rational target of anger is wrongdoing. It is against this background that we perceive the mistakes, e.g., that anger at a brutish dog is irrational. Here, the normal informs the normative. In light of the normal, it would take a strong argument to persuade us that, really, anger at wrongdoing is irrational. Likewise, that people do in fact turn their feelings of helplessness toward God, rather than elsewhere, indicates that doing so is rational. In some cases, the *prima facie* justification of common consent is overturned – flying seems fearful but we recall the statistics, winning the lottery seems to be something joyful but we review Platonic diagrams of the soul, etc. Minimally, we are owed arguments showing that there is a better direction for our feelings of helplessness.[3]

### 3.2 God the best of the potential helpers

Desire aims at the good, desire inclines the will of the desirer to act in ways that will bring about some good. So, of potential helpers, it is epistemically and practically rational to seek the help of the best helper, to seek help in the way that 'maximizes expected helpfulness.' I note 5 criteria that show God to be the best of potential helpers.

#### 3.2.1. Targeted at an agent

The desire to seek help is rational only if it is targeted at an agent. Seeking help is a distinctively inter-personal action, an action that attempts to get help from a helper, not merely to actualize a benefit by any means. This condition rules out the suggestion of seeking help from impersonal forces such as nature, magic, fate, or karma. These are forces to be man-

[3] Since our condition remains desperate even when these things are not presently afflicting us, those people presently afflicted are, in some ways, in a better epistemic state than those who are not. That is, someone may wrongly overlook the desperateness of their condition if death and disease are likely to be many decades in the future.

aged and wielded, if at all, to expand one's own control of a situation, not agents whose help is sought.

### 3.2.2. Targeted at an agent that could help

Seeking help from an agent is rational only if it is metaphysically possible, and physically possible given the laws of nature, that the agent actually help. When targeted at a being that could not actually help, the desire seeks for a good in a place in which that good cannot be found. In such a desire, one desires something impossible, to be helped by that which cannot help, which is irrational.

There are many desperate situations concerning which it is best for us to seek the help of other human beings. Yet, we cannot render one another much help concerning the things that make the human condition desperate – nobody can actually make me immortal (or radically extend my life), or make my well-being non-fragile (or much less fragile), or give me all philosophical knowledge (or a good deal of it). Nevertheless, it seems metaphysically possible and even physically possible that human beings could be immortal (or have radically extended lives), have non-fragile well-beings (or much less fragile well-beings), or have philosophical knowledge (or much more of it). So, to the extent that we could be helped by persons other than God – e.g., time-travelers, aliens, angels – then to that degree it would be rational to seek their help. Yet, these potential helpers only debatably satisfy the present condition, whereas God clearly does.

The possibility that we could be helped by time-travelers is quite doubtful given the many difficulties suggested against the physical possibility (Arntzenius and Maudlin 2009) or metaphysical possibility of time travel (N. J. J. Smith 2018). The same is true of angels and the souls of the dead, e.g., the body-soul interaction problem besetting dualism is considerably magnified (Guthrie 2018, chaps. 8, 9).

It seems possible that the human condition could be helped by aliens. Though programs like SETI may seek many things, perhaps among these they seek help. If the proverbial Martians do show up, we would want them to share their philosophical ideas with us, their methods of con-

trolling nature, their social organization, and so forth, perhaps greatly improving the human condition. Nevertheless, we might doubt whether it is physically possible that aliens could help us (those alive today) given factors such as the difficulties of interstellar travel (Newman and Sagan 1981).

By contrast to these cases, given that none of the three things that make our human condition desperate are metaphysical or even physical necessities, it seems that God is able to help us with them. No being faces fewer metaphysical and physical limitations on their ability to help than God. Whatever our exact conception of God's power, it allows that God could make human beings not die, lessen the fragility of their well-being, and impart more philosophical knowledge to them. Similarly, it seems possible that God could help make it the case that we enjoy a post-mortal existence without the things that make our present human condition desperate.

#### 3.2.3. Targeted at an agent able to receive our requests for help

There is some reason to question whether it is metaphysically or physically possible for time-travelers, aliens, angels, or the souls of the dead, to receive our requests for help. According to Aquinas, for example, angels and the souls of the dead know particulars only insofar as God enables them to, lacking a natural ability to know what is happening in the world (Aquinas 1947, ST I ,Q89, A3). Whether communication with extraterrestrials is possible or not is, to say the least, unclear (Dunér 2011).

By contrast, it is part of the common concept of God that God can receive our requests for help. Arguments showing that God cannot hear us disprove God's existence, rather than informing a conception of God. To show that God does not know particulars is to show that God does not exist (Drange 1998; Belo 2006).

#### 3.2.4. Targeted at an agent willing to help

Since the desire to seek help aims at actually getting help, it is rational to target it, all else being equal, at the being most likely to be willing as well as able to deliver help.

The only type of intelligent agent of which we are uncontroversially aware, ourselves, are often unwilling to help one another. The same might be true of other created persons, for all we know. That which is divine is best in its kind. Given that, in most situations, it is a positive moral trait to be willing to help, this implies that God has an unsurpassable willingness to help. Again, the divine, as the best, gives help in the way that is best. This, apparently, involves giving help in a wide range of situations, with matters large and small, without expectation of return. So, whereas it is doubtful that any other creatures have the good will to help, the idea of God is the idea of a helper. In Christianity the Holy Spirit is called the helper, the paraclete. In Islam the helper, al-Wali, is one of God's 99 names. Again, to show that God is indifferent to our requests for help is to show that God does not exist: "Can we possibly conceive that God is a being insensible, deaf to our prayers, our wishes, and our vows, and wholly unconnected with us?" (Cicero 2014, 59)

#### 3.2.5. Completeness of help

One can be helped more or less completely. All else being equal, it is rational to seek help from a being able to help more completely. If A can only give us all philosophical knowledge and B can do this but also remedy our mortality and fragile well-being, then it is rational to seek help from B in preference to A. God is able to help more completely than the other entities canvassed throughout this section since he is more powerful than them.

### 3.3. God the cause of the world

If God is the cause of the world, then to seek help from anyone is, simultaneously, to seek help from God. As something cannot come from nothing, "nothing can give to another that which it hath not itself" (Berkeley 2007, pt. 3; cf. Plotinus 1984, V.3.15; Proclus 1963, 28; Aquinas 1947, ST I, Q4, A2). So, everything that the effect has is contained already in the cause, every power to act of the effect is a power to act of the cause. From the same principle, the effect is like its cause. So, the effect exists by partici-

pation in its cause; as its likeness, similitude, image. To interact with the effect is, therefore, to interact with the cause. When one seeks the help of another creature one seeks the help of an effect, and so the help of the cause.

Considering God as the efficient cause of the world, as the source of its motion, this is to say that whatever help I receive from a creature I receive from God also, on account of how the mechanisms of the world have been wound. Considering God as the formal cause of the world, as its pattern, this is to say that whatever help I receive from another creature I receive by their participation in the divine, their deiformity – being good, exercising providence over me, uniting with me by treating my good as their own.

In this vein, some religions teach that we should seek the help of angels and the souls of the dead (Fredericksen 2021), but that the providence that these beings exercise over us is not distinct from divine providence (Aquinas 1947, ST I, Q103, A6). On this argument, God is the rational target of our help-seeking by always being its target, whether God's help is sought directly as such, or indirectly in its creaturely manifestations.

## 4. Objections answered

### 4.1. If the human condition is desperate and the presence of the desperate makes desperation rational, must we spend our lives in continual desperation? Can we ever take a break and experience other emotions?

To be sure, we should not spend all our time having feelings about the human condition, and our feeling about the human condition should not just be desperation but a wide cycle of attitudes – joy, fortuity, aporia. At any given time, the formal objects of innumerable emotional states are present. It is cause for gratitude that your children are in good health. It is cause for grief that your sibling is dead. We probably cannot feel both emotions at once, and to feel either at all times would be disordered.

However, we can still say that the presence of the formal object of an emotion is a necessary condition for rationally experiencing that emotion – if your sibling is not dead, it could not be rational to grieve them. Likewise, the presence of the formal object of an emotion is a sufficient condition for rationally experiencing that emotion, not in the sense that you ought to always be experiencing grief, but that, were you to experience grief, you would do so rationally. To actually experience grief continually would be not a failure in the rationality of that affective state, but a failure in the rationality of attention. To hyper-fixate on the death of your sibling, and so continually feel grief about it, would be a mistake of a different kind than, say, feeling grief about your children's good health.

This answer implies the possibility that the desperation of the human condition, though licensing desperation, is something that nobody need ever attend to and so never actually feel desperate about. This is an implausible possibility. In a balanced emotional life, mortality, fragility, and philosophical ignorance, are the sorts of things that should sometimes claim our attention.

### 4.2. To turn to God out of desperation is vicious. Attraction to God's goodness, rather than aversion to one's own lack of goodness, is the appropriate motive for approaching God

I agree that someone who only related to God as a helper would be vicious – the person who only prays in dire straits, who only looks to God to solve their problems. Plausibly, there are many aspects of our emotional life that can involve a movement of the will toward God, relating us to God in a variety of ways. Gratitude for one's life may present God as a benefactor. Awe at the world's beauty may present God as an artisan. Guilt for one's secret misdeeds may present God as a judge.

Yet, we should reject the claim that turning to God out of desperation is, considered in itself, vicious. Ethical virtue is excellence in the desiring part of the soul. Our desires are excellent when they dispose us to that which is really good for us, each virtue concerning a particular domain of goods (Aristotle 2011, 1101b 15). For example, the temperate person de-

sires the goods of gustatory pleasure in an excellent way, is not excessive or deficient in desire for food, desires the right foods for the right reasons.

In the case of desiring God's help *vis-à-vis* the human condition, this desire can be arrayed under the heading of excellence in help-seeking. One could suffer the vice of excess, "neediness," seeking help even when it is not required, or to quell emotions like loneliness, or deficiency, "obduracy," preferring to drown than reveal one's lack of control. I have argued that God is the best target, the epistemically and practically rational target, of our desire to seek help vis-à-vis the human condition. So, seeking God's help is excellence in help-seeking. One can also consider this desire under the heading of piety, as the virtue concerned with the divine. Here, we see that to only want help from God would be insufficient for piety, but this does not imply that such a desire is of itself impious. The nature of a relationship is colored by the nature of the people related. So, it is appropriate that human beings should, as well as positively contemplating the divine majesty, relate to God through the aperture of their own finitude, turning in desperation as well as awe. Calling upon God for help is widely sanctioned by most religious traditions, and despairing of God's assistance is called a vice (Aquinas 1947, ST II-II Q20 A1).

### 4.3. It is rational to seek God's help only if God exists. Perhaps God does not exist

I respond by denying that God's existence is a necessary condition on the rationality of seeking God's help. Rather, the epistemic possibility that God exists is the relevant necessary condition. Suppose that a son is late in arriving home from high-school. His mother hopes that he will arrive home soon. In fact, the son died a few minutes ago in a car crash. The mother's hope is epistemically rational (rational, given the best available evidence), since it remains epistemically possible that her son will arrive home soon. Yet, we might be tempted to say that the mother's hope is absolutely irrational (irrational, given the facts), that this is an important demerit against her hope.

I respond in two ways. For one thing, the standard of absolute rationality exists purely as a limit-concept. We can only ever attempt to ap-

proximate it by using the available evidence, which yields a judgment of epistemic rationality. Absolute rationality is a standard to which we lack access. So, by ought implies can, whether our attitudes are absolutely rational or irrational can never be of significance for us. For another, the legitimacy of the concept of absolute rationality is doubtful. Reason concerns the mind, and the mind's relationship to the world. To say that a mental attitude is rational or irrational, in abstraction from the reasons that a mind has or could have for or against forming that attitude, would be a category mistake. For example, if I believed that "an even number of ducks exists" (Feldman and Conee 1985, 15) and my belief was true, this by itself would not make the belief rational in any sense – we would need to ask whether I had arrived at the true belief on the basis of the reasons available to me, rationally, or by luck.

Accordingly, the mother's hope is rational, until the balance of available evidence shows her that her son very likely cannot come home. Likewise, so long as it is epistemically possible that God exists, it will be rational to seek his help. The waving and screaming of our fjord-explorer makes sense so long as the possibility of help is open – even without any positive reason to think that there may be a helper nearby, his help-seeking is intelligible.

Though all theists and agnostics, and many atheists, allow that it is epistemically possible that God exists, that the available evidence does not foreclose the possibility of God's existence, some atheists would deny this. To these I offer a trilemma. Perhaps they ought not to seek help at all. But this is inconsistent with what we have said about the desperateness of the human condition, which it seems atheists have no special reason to deny. Perhaps they ought to seek help elsewhere. But it is invidious for atheists to be reduced to the position of seeking the help of aliens and time-travelers, the coming AI-savior, etc. Finally, perhaps they ought to seek help without having any particular helper in mind, or meaning to solicit help from one helper over another. For example, perhaps they should mentally ruminate on their desire as a kind of indefinite proto-prayer, hold open a mental space for inspiration (aesthetic experience, meditation), or discuss with others their desperation about the human condition

and whether there is anything to be done about it. This seems to be the most plausible lemma. Yet, it amounts to seeking God's help. By analogy, when our fjord-explorer is seen yelling and splashing by the fisherman, the fisherman understands that his help is being sought, even though not his help specifically, or under the description of a fisherman.

### 4.4. If God is good, then he will help whether we seek his help or not. God is good. Therefore, it is irrational to seek God's help

Granting both premises, it does not follow that seeking God's help is irrational, either epistemically or practically. By analogy, that the postman will deliver the package on time whether or not I desire him to does not make my desire that he deliver my package on time irrational. Such desires are still desires for the desirable, and any actions they inspire still strive toward a real good. Likewise, we can say that seeking God's help is not good because it causes God to behave differently but because it is good for us to receive, co-operate with, what God does (Reibsamen 2019).

Further, there is reason for doubting the conditional. Everything that is good calls for a response of some sort – beautiful paintings call for appreciation, the child's eagerness to learn calls for instruction. Seeking God's help is good. So, if we seek God's help then he makes a response of some sort, that he could rightly omit if we do not (Stump 1979).

### 4.5. Many people seek God's help, but are not helped. So, probably, God will not help me either

Assuming that some people have sought God's help, it is clearly not the case that they ceased to be subject to mortality, life's misfortunes, or philosophical ignorance. Yet, this alone does not put us in an epistemic position to say that God does not help those who seek his help. Maybe God rectifies the evils of the human condition in an after-life. There are a wide range of arguments for an after-life – e.g., psychical, moral, teleological, experiential (Reichenbach 1978, 113–33). To the degree that help is not forthcoming in this life, my discussion functions as an argument from natural desire for an after-life. Again, one can lessen the desperateness of

a situation by promising, or otherwise making-known, future help. Such assurance, in the form of religious belief, provides help in this life in some secondary but still important senses: placing the evils of the human condition in a bigger frame, lessening feelings of desperation or giving them a productive outlet, giving strategies and techniques for positive coping (Schwalm et al. 2022). Lastly, without needing to posit any mechanism beyond the psycho-social, one could interpret the well-established benefits of religiosity – for mental and physical health, longevity (Garssen, Visser, and Pool 2021; McCullough et al. 2000; Jim et al. 2015) – under the biblical-prophetic model of sign-and-fulfillment; a small help is given in the present, confirming that greater help will come in the future.

## Conclusion

The human condition is desperate, which rationally requires desperation. Desperation involves helplessness, a desire to seek help. God is the best target of that desire. So, for our affective lives to be rational, we must feel a need for, and take steps to solicit, God's help. I have not argued for God's existence, but that the idea of God properly plays a role in the life of our emotions and desires. God signifies the possibility that the adamantine walls of our finitude can be breached, that our impotence need not imply our despair. Whilst there is significant discussion of God's emotional life or lack thereof (Scrutton 2013), the topic of how we should feel about God is relatively neglected in contemporary philosophy of religion. So, aside from the peculiar upshots mentioned previously – for non-doxastic religiosity, the problem of divine hiddenness – hopefully this discussion can invite further consideration of how other emotions and desires interact with the idea of the divine.

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