THE PERSPECTIVE OF ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION ON THE ALMIGHTINESS OF GODS AND THE STATUS OF EVIL IN THE RELIGIONS OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST MESOPOTAMIA AND EGYPT

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Abstract

Analytic philosophy of religion implies a philosophical approach to religion as a phenomenon of social and spiritual life. The present study proposes a synthetic analysis of Mesopotamian and Egyptian proto-religions along two capital lines of debate: the Almightiness of gods and the status of evil. The myths that correspond to the two afore mentioned civilizations consist of fundamental religious ideas that refer to these two topics. In Mesopotamia, *Enuma Elish*, the Epic of Creation, highlights the cosmogonic, theogonic, and anthropogenic powers of gods. Marduk, the supreme god, creates the Universe, the first human being, as well as the vegetal and animal world. The Egyptian pantheon includes a number of almighty deities that are governed by the great god Ra. He creates the world and the people; he establishes order and peace in the Universe. Sacred texts talk about Ra's absolute power. However, there is also the belief that a spiritual factor underlies the creation of the Cosmos. Through their deeds, the almighty deities establish the grounds for Good. Nevertheless, Evil exists, as well. There are numerous negative deities, gods of darkness, and evil demons. Reality is constantly perceived as dynamic. Both Mesopotamian and Egyptian books of wisdom develop normative systems that reinforce the fight against Evil. The dyad Good-Evil underlies the entire structure of religions.

Keywords: Marduk, Gilgamesh, Hammurabi, Seth, Evil

1. Introduction

The philosophy of religion implies a philosophical approach to religion as a phenomenon of social and spiritual life. The core of religions is a significant part of this type of philosophy. Analytic philosophy of religion has been called 'philosophical theology' [1] and 'analytic theology' [2]. This approach involves

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a scientific analysis of religion, which is also used in the field of other social sciences: Sociology of religion (from Émile Durkheim to Max Weber), Anthropology of religion (James Frazer, Marcel Griaulle, G. Dumesil, M. Mausse), Psychology of religion, Phenomenology of religion (G. Durand), and History of religion (Mircea Eliade).

Compared with Phenomenology, Analytic philosophy of religion displays a different set of coordinates in the analysis of 'religious facts'. It does not abandon the traditional metaphysical project, essentially adopting the perspective of a sort of onto-theology, whose object can be read in the Transcendence to the phenomenal space. There are manifold thematic orientations: the coherence of religious systems, the redefinition of key concepts, the analysis of the characteristics of gods, the proof of their existence, the relationships between gods and the foundations of morality, the status of good and evil, the relationships between religion and Science, or between religions, etc.

Analytic philosophy of religion fully confirms Francis Bacon's statement: "Religio praecipuum humanae societatis vinculum" ("Religion is the main bond of humanity"). Throughout history, religious experience has been manifested in various ways, in the shape of extremely complex phenomena.

Most of the specialised studies have focused on monotheistic religions and particularly on Christianity, from the achievements of medieval theology to 21st century theology. The present paper proposes an analysis of Mesopotamian and Egyptian proto-religions, which had a marked influence on Judaism and Christianity and which underlie major themes of religious spirituality.

2. The issue of the almightiness of gods

According to J. Wach, "A significant part of these [religious] systems are cosmocentric and theocentric". "Theological, cosmogonic and anthropogenic ideas keep being expressed in terms that are specific to myths, doctrines and dogmas." [3] These proto-religions have a unifying character. Ancient Sumerians, Assyro-Babylonians and Egyptians developed a proto-religion and a proto-philosophy consisting in myths, in mythical spirituality. "The myth, therefore, claims to be a spontaneous form of mundane existence. It is not a theory or a doctrine, but a vision on things, beings and the self, and it also refers to behaviours and attitudes, all of which are inserted by man in reality." [4] "Mythical conscience is meant to integrate man in the Universe, to give an explanation for reality, and to designate an existential context in which it is employed (…). The myth has a paradigmatic function and an ontological structure that underlie a given reality and ensure an illustrative efficiency." [5] Cosmogonic myths reveal a certain type of religion and philosophy; as S.N. Kramer puts it, they essentially represent "Speculations on nature, the Universe and its origin, and, moreover, on its structure and performance" [6]. The Sumerian theological system was very complex (with a pantheon that included over 2,500 gods) and it argued for the almightiness of gods. *Enuma Elish*

(meaning 'when on high'), the epic of creation, puts together numerous myths dating from around 2000 BC, organising them into a cosmogony and a theogony. According to *Enuma Elish*, everything derives from the primordial water forms: Apsû (representing fresh water and masculinity), Tiamat (representing oceanic water, a personification of the female principle), and Mummu (the primaeval sea). The cosmogonic force of these entities is described on the first tablet of the epic: "When on high the heaven had not been named,/ Firm ground below had not been called by name,/ Naught but primordial Apsu, their begetter,/ (And) Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all,/ (…) When no gods whatever had been brought into being,/ Uncalled by name, their destinies undetermined-/ Then it was that the gods were formed within them./ Lahmu and Lahamu were brought forth, by name they were called…" [7]

The god Anu is the personification of the sky, and Enlil is the representation of the wind. The two were considered to be 'kings of the gods' and to possess extraordinary powers.

Another important deity is Ea, the god of art, science and magic, who invented writing. He is considered the god of knowledge. His son is Marduk, the divinity of Babylon. He is the god that rules the Universe, the one who determined the trajectory of the planets, the four seasons, and the twelve months of the year. His immense power underlay the creation of the Earth and of the Universe: "He appointed the year, marked off divisions,/ And set up three stars each for the twelve months./ After he had organized the year,/ He established the heavenly station of Ne-beru to fix the stars' intervals./ That none should transgress or be slothful/ He fixed the heavenly stations of Enlil and Ea with it./ (…) From her two eyes he let the Euphrates and Tigris flow,/ He blocked her nostrils, but left [them to be used for growing crops]./ He heaped up the distant [mountains] on her breasts,/ He bored wells to channel the springs." [http://www.ancient.eu.com/article/225/]

Enuma Elish ends with a list of the 56 names that define Marduk's great powers: "Nergal – is Marduk in battle (…)/ Enlil – is the Marduk of composure and guidance/ Sin – is Marduk light at night/ Samas – is Marduk the just" [8].

Also called 'the child of the Sun', Bel Marduk is mentioned in Berossus' famous *Babyloniaka*, as well, a text that describes a cosmology similar to the one in *Enuma Elish*: "And Bel created the stars, the Sun, the Moon, and the five planets" [http://www.ancient.eu.com/article/225/].

The cardinal moment that *Enuma Elish* describes is the creation of man from clay and the blood of Qingu, the god who stood by Tiamat and whom Marduk decapitated: "When Marduk heard the gods' speech/ He conceived a desire to accomplish clever things./ He opened his mouth addressing Ea,/ He counsels that which he had pondered in his heart,/ «I will bring together blood to form bone,/ I will bring into being Lullû, whose name shall be 'man'./ I will create Lullû – man/ On whom the toil of the gods will be laid that they may rest»" [http://www.ancient.eu.com/article/225/].

Made from the blood of a rebellious god, man carries this defiance in his soul; he is like the gods, but he bears the burden of the original sin, the sin of the Genesis.

Marduk's amazing power is also recorded in the 'Prologue' to the *Code of Hammurabi*, which states that the god is "the greatest [ruler] over the four corners of the world, he made himself an everlasting kingdom, whose foundations are as solid as the Sky and the Earth" [9].

The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of humanity's greatest work of art, recounts the constant conflict between the hero Gilgamesh and the gods. He seeks immortality, but, after a strenuous journey of initiation, he is convinced that only gods are immortal.

Egyptian religion is well-organised into a series of sacred texts: the Pyramid texts, the Coffin texts, the *Book of the Dead*, the Shabaka Stone, and numerous other religious texts (hymns and incantations).

Apart from many local deities, the Egyptian pantheon comprises gods of cities and of justice, as well as some cosmic gods whose main virtues are the creation of the Universe and the establishment of order in the Universe. The most powerful are Atum-Ra, Aton, Thoth, Horus, Isis, Anubis, and Hathor. Ra is the central god, a representation of the Sun. This supreme divinity appears in all the significant Egyptian myths and hymns. The very diverse Egyptian cosmogony depicts the appearance of the 'first Earth' over the primaeval Water, "in Heliopolis, also called the 'Golden Mound' that was included in the Temple of the Sun, was identified with the 'Primordial Mound'" [10]. The theologians in Heliopolis consider that the core figure of the Creation of the world is the great god Ra, as the primordial cosmic force. According to *The Book of Knowing the Evolutions of Ra*, "I came into being and, through me, things came into being/ All things came into being after I came into being/ And many were the things that came into being from my mouth./ Neither sky, nor earth had yet come into being, there were neither dirt, nor crawling things in this place./ I have created all from Nu, from Nothingness./ (…) I thought it in my heart, and many things came into being from things that came into being by birth, who in their turn came into being by their births." [11]

The creational function of Ra's spiritual force is salient. He creates Himself. In a hymn about the 'Creation of the World', we can read the following: "May you be praised and glorified, you, the Almighty, whom the gods stem from,/ You, who have created yourself, (…)/ Who, by the power of your form, have raised yourself,/ And by yourself you have created your own form,/ As there is no father that may have carved your face,/ Nor mother's womb that might have borne your life,/ There is no place that you might have come from" [11, p. 93].

Ra's supreme power is highlighted in the anthropogenic records from a text in Heracleopolis: "Sheltered are the people, the herd of the god. He made heaven and earth according to their wish, he shattered the chaos of water, he created the skies so that their noses could breathe. They are in his image, after his likeness, deriving from his body." [11, p. 92]

The same superlative qualities are emphasised in the text 'Ra and the Serpent': "A tale about the greatest god, who created himself, who made Heaven, Earth, water, air, fire, gods, people, beasts, animals, worms, birds, and fish came into being, a story about the king of men and of gods, the unique, the everlasting, the one that goes by many names, whose way is unknown, whom gods do not know" [11, p. 97].

According to the Egyptian doctrines, the pharaoh is the son of Ra. Therefore, when he dies, he is identified with Ra.

Through a series of hymns, *The Book of the Dead* illustrates Ra's journey in the Underworld: 'Hymn of Worship to Ra', 'Hymn of Praise to Ra as He Travels in His Barge', etc. Almighty Ra travels across the sky in his 'day-barge'. He then travels in his 'night-barge', through the dark body of the Cosmic Serpent.

The dead pharaoh travels in Ra's 'solar barge' to the Land of the West, 'the Land of Life': "You have sit on the throne of Ra to give the Gods orders, as you truly are Ra" [12].

The cosmogonic, theogonic and anthropogenic abilities of the gods Atum and Thoth are illustrated in one of the most meaningful religious and philosophical texts of the Egyptian mythology. "The inscription of King Shabaka is a unique text that proves the maturity of the spiritual frame as regards the act of creation. The text states that all human beings, all animals, all serpents live through the force of Atum's ability to think and speak everything he fancies. Language reiterates what the heart thinks. Therefore, it makes all the gods come into being, as any form of divinity is produced by the thinking of the heart and the expression of language. Language gives life to the just and death to the unjust. It creates when words are uttered, whereas the thought of the heart does so through work, any work, through the hands that help, the legs that walk, the limbs that move. Language is Thoth the wise, whose force is greater than that of the gods." [13]

The divine word creates cosmic life; it is the supreme energy that puts the entire Universe in motion.

The god Thoth is less important than Ra, as he is considered the ruler of the world. He is the god of Time, the master of all destinies. He is the god of knowledge and magic. However, there is one other quality he has got: he records Ra's entire activity. Thoth's wife, the 'Lady of Rules', is Maath, the goddess of justice, who, together with her husband, judges the mortals' deeds. The myths note that Thoth participated in the cosmic creation, as well.

The great power of the key gods in the Egyptian mythology is manifested in the act of creation, whether we refer to the universe, to gods, human beings, or to the organisation of this Universe.

Nevertheless, the cosmos (existence in general) does not imply harmony exclusively. The cosmos is also subject to negative phenomena that overthrow this harmony, due to the presence and activity of evil deities or spirits, or due to major existential concerns: negative events, injustice, disease, death (if we refer

to human existence, on the level of which everything is regarded in relation to the norms of morality).

3. The status of evil

Gods are almighty. They create the Universe, the human beings, and they impose cosmic order. However, a question arises: if deities champion Goodness, why does Evil exist? There is a contradiction between these statements: 1) Deities are almighty; 2) Deities are good; 3) Evil exists. From a rational point of view, the statements are conflicting. The proto-theological Mesopotamian and Egyptian systems of thought tried to solve this puzzle.

The inventory of negative deities includes a series of gods that have evil power. The god of the Netherworld is Nergal, the god of war, plague and drought. He is considered to be the Lord of the underworld, and, in this respect, he is helped by 40 demons. A similar god is Irra, who possesses the same evil attributes. The netherworld, Kigallu, is called 'the land of no return', and Kutha is the main seat of Nergal's cult. Belet-Seri is the scribe who records the name of the dead entering the underworld. The goddess Ishtar descends into the underworld to rescue Tammuz, her lover. It is here, in the netherworld, that we find numerous negative characters. The almighty Lady of the Underworld, Ereshkigal, sends the gatekeeper to let Ishtar in through the seven gates that are opened one at a time. At each gate, Ishtar has to take off one item of clothing: "«Why, gatekeeper, did you remove the great tiara on my head?» «Come in, my lady! Thus are the rules of the lady of the netherworld!» He brought her in through the second gate, he loosened and removed the earrings on her ears: «Why, gatekeeper, did you remove the earrings on my ears?» «Come in, my lady. Thus are the rules of the lady of the netherworld» (…)" [http://www.soas.ac.uk/baplar/recordings/itars-descent-to-the-netherworld-lines-1-125-read-by-martin-west.html] At the seventh gate, a similar conversation occurs: "«Why, gatekeeper, did you remove the loincloth on my body?» «Come in, my lady. Thus are the rules of the lady of the netherworld»." [http://www.soas.ac.uk/baplar/recordings/itars-descent-to-the-netherworld-lines-1-125-read-by-martin-west.html] Nergal, the god of the netherworld, cast 60 plagues upon the goddess, but, in the end, she manages to rescue the shepherd-god Tammuz.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* presents a number of evil characters: Humbaba (the guardian of the Cedar Forest), the Bull of Heaven, and the Scorpion Man. After fierce battles, Gilgamesh, the hero that represents the forces of good, defeats these wicked figures.

The Assyro-Babylonians blamed the appearance of diseases and plagues on demons. The Chaldeans were famous for their art of driving away evil spirits. Magical operations were in the custody of the god Ea. These operations of sympathetic magic consisted of activities that simulated the actual destruction of demons. In this context, the repertoire of incantations is extremely diverse, as the practice of divination is defined by repeatability and cyclicality.

The sacred texts reveal that moral laws were observed in order to practise Good and to forestall the revenge of the gods. We find examples of such tenets in 'The Wisdom of Ahikar', the 'Dialogue of Pessimism', 'The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer', or in 'Enki and the World Order'.

The *Code of Hammurabi* sets the grounds for the punishment of evil in society and the exercise of judicial norms for various social categories. In the 'Prologue', Hammurabi wishes "that justice come on Earth, to destroy the wicked and the sinful, so that the strong could not oppress the weak, and I would rise (…), over the people in darkness, to give light to the world" [9].

Here are some restrictive judicial norms: "1) If a man accuses another, casting the blame of manslaughter upon him but failing to prove it, the accused shall be killed. 6) If a man steals from the property of a god or of a palace, that man shall be killed, and the one who receives the stolen thing from him shall also be put to death." [9, p. 14]; "195) If a son strikes his father, his hand will be cut off" [9, p. 44].

The body of laws is what identifies the moral entities and reinforces them. It ensures the inner dynamic of the system of thought, as well as its major meaning and significance.

I end this part of my analysis by noting that, indeed, according to Kramer, the Assyro-Babylonians "treasured kindness and truth, law and freedom, justice and honesty, mercy and compassion. They loathed evil and lies, anarchy and disorder, injustice and oppression, unlawfulness and dishonesty, cruelty and carelessness." [6, p. 165]

The Egyptian pantheon includes negative deities, as well. Illustrative in this respect are Month, the god of war of Thebes, and Seth, whose power pertains to the occult. Seth is the god of the desert, of darkness and of storms. Seth is the god of the Netherworld. Here, Seth kills Osiris to take his throne. The myth of Isis and Osiris depicts Seth's negative facet, his desire to kill Osiris, the dramatic events that take place, their transformation into hippopotami, the stone-boat race etc. Osiris returns from the Netherworld; as such, he is the illustrative representation of the mythical hero that defeats death. This ancient myth is much older than the myth of Cain and Abel, and of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The cult of Seth became the cult of a wicked deity, similar to the cult of Satan, which it resembles significantly.

Another class of beings that are midway between evil gods and people is represented by demons. These are very numerous and take various shapes. They have the head of a ferocious beast, and their body is similar to that of humans. Demons inhabit both the underworld, and our world. In this realm, demons live in the air and on the ground, and are active especially at night. They commonly bring illness and death, but they can be the cause of many other misfortunes (e.g. they can take possession of a human being's body, thus putting him through excruciating ordeals). The only manner to drive them away or to destroy them is by means of magical practices. Like all the other ancient cultures and civilizations, the Egyptians practised black magic (in the service of evil) and white magic (in the service of good). The rituals were alike, yet their

finalities differed (for example, in the case of black magic, the demon/god that caused evil or that could cause evil was invoked). In Egypt, there are a remarkable number of magical texts: "One may observe that the ritual of exorcism had several parts: a sacrifice of little importance, an incantation, an act performed by the exorcist, the freeing of the god or demon summoned, and, in the end, the giving of talismans. Sometimes, a constraining formula is included in the ritual, which forces the evil spirit or god to do what is asked of him." [14]

The sacred and esoteric texts furthermore contain maxims, aphorisms, and proverbs, which dwell on moral reflections. *The Instructions of Kagemni* and *The Teachings of Ptahhotep* are full of proverbs and moral sayings that are meant to protect one against existential evil.

The Teachings of Ptahhotep is one of the oldest Egyptian books of wisdom and the most complex handbook on life to have been written in the Nile Valley.

The Teaching for King Merikare comprises the instructions given by a pharaoh of the Xia Dynasty; in essence, it is a political treatise, useful to any king that wishes to fight against evil and to establish justice. 'The Eloquent Peasant' is a sapiential text that provides instructions, decrees, and aphorisms: "Do not give evil in return for good"/ "Punish only he that deserves to be punished, and no one shall ridicule your justice"/ "Do not deprive the poor man of what he has not"/ "Justice is forever; it accompanies the one who serves its cause down to the land of the dead… the world remembers him for the good he did".

4. Conclusion

On paying attention to the two cultures analysed above, one easily notices that evil is considered eternal, immortal, and that it is depicted as reigning over mankind. The almightiness of the gods is extremely well-grounded in two of the greatest civilizations the world has seen. We may ask ourselves, is evil a punishment given by the gods? Deities always refer to the moral dimension. When Evil is victorious in the world, the Divine Forces step in. This binary paradigm will be borrowed by all the major monotheistic religions. The dyad Good-Evil is a constant element in the universal history of religions.

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5. Religion and Science. 6. Contemporary Challenges to Theism: Evil and Suffering. 7. Contemporary Challenges to Theism: Humanism, Naturalism, and Atheism. Â Analytic philosophy of religion has gone through several very distinctive phases of development, which are the result of the more fundamental phases that analytic philosophy itself has gone through as well as various developments in science. In this volume, I have identified the developments in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion and situated these developments in the broader philosophical context in which they have taken place. Â These are some of the standard issues of interest in analytic philosophy of religion (see Harris 2002). Qohelet's concept of deity: A comparative-philosophical perspective. Philosophy of religion is the philosophical examination of the themes and concepts involved in religious traditions as well as the broader philosophical task of reflecting on matters of religious significance including the nature of religion itself, alternative concepts of God or ultimate reality, and the religious significance of general features of the cosmos (e.g., the laws of nature, the emergence of consciousness). and of historical events (e.g., the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake, the Holocaust). Philosophy of religion also includes the investigation and assessment of worldviews (such as secular A Companion to Analytic Philosophy. Ed. A. P. Martinich and David Sosa 21. Â Blackwell Companion to Ancient Near East.pdf. Â 2007. 521 P. ISBN 1405120541 A Companion to Greek Religion covers all aspects of religion in the ancient Greek world from the archaic, through the classical and into the Hellenistic period. Each of the volumersquo;s 29 essays is written by an international expert and provides a survey of a particular area that reflects contemporary scholarship. Holy books from all religions contradict each other. Picking the wrong religion, or wrong denomination, will put you in eternal torture. Then there is just the idea that eternal torture exists at all. Not to mention disease, parasites, earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis, droughts, etc. Â For one, "innocent" is an arbitrary status which we assign based on our own subjective perspective. Furthermore, we live in a world based on natural laws, one of which is decay/degradation, so there are going to sickness, famine, etc. Based on theology, God did not intend this to be the state of the world, but this is what it became after Adam and the fall of man. Also, the earth is meant to be "proving ground" of sorts, with this world not being the end game, and what is trial without suffering?

Mesopotamian religion, the beliefs and practices of the Sumerians and Akkadians, and their successors, the Babylonians and Assyrians, who inhabited ancient Mesopotamia (now in Iraq) in the millennia before the Christian era. Read here to learn more about Mesopotamian religion. While every effort has been made to follow citation style rules, there may be some discrepancies. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions. Select Citation Style. MLA APA Chicago Manual of Style. Copy Citation. Share. The ancient Egyptian religion contained roughly 2000 gods. Osiris the god of the underworld was one of the most worshiped. Some other highly worshiped God's include Isis the goddess of motherhood and abundance; Horus, god of the sky. The Pharaoh was believe to be part man and part god and had good relationships with the gods. The Pharaoh was believed to be the go-between Egyptian humans and the gods. When the Pharaoh died Egyptians believed he would become a god. Egyptian society also believed if the nation was in turmoil it was the Pharaoh's fault for upsetting the gods. The ancient Egyptians devoted their lives to honoring their gods and goddesses through rituals and building temples to honor them. These ancient religions affected every aspect of life in the ancient Near East, from spirituality to farming, from medicine to the rule of society. As such, they were not simply a part of a person's life but ordered and shaped that person's life every day. Membership was not a choice as it is in modern religions. Priests increasingly relied on rituals to ward off evil spirits and to foretell future events to ensure the good will of the gods and to protect against demons. Astronomical (relating to the heavens) events took on major importance and astrology, the study of the influence of the stars and planets on human affairs, became nearly a science for the priests. Organized Mesopotamian religion collapsed after Cyrus of Persia, a Zoroastrian, conquered the Babylonian empire in 539 bce. Mesopotamian religion refers to the religious beliefs and practices of the civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia, particularly Sumer, Akkad, Assyria and Babylonia between circa 3500 BC and 400 AD, after which they largely gave way to Syriac Christianity. The religious development of Mesopotamia and Mesopotamian culture in general was not particularly influenced by the movements of the various peoples into and throughout the area, particularly the south. Rather, Mesopotamian religion was a consistent Assyrian religion was an evolution of the ancient polytheistic Sumerian and Akkadian religions into henotheism, a religion based on the worship of one supreme god, but recognizing the existence of others. This was represented through the gradual takeover by Ashur of the roles of other gods, and this process runs parallel with the expansionist policies of the Assyrian Empire.[5] As the Assyrians extended their domain over other lands, they considered it important that the local peoples acknowledge the Assyrian king as the king of their lands as well. This brought to an end over 3000 years of Mesopotamian dominance of the near east.