

We Need To Rescue God from the Religions

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The meaning of the word “God” has changed in countless ways over recorded history, and it will keep changing. It’s the most fluid yet most empowering concept our species has ever discovered. There’s no reason we modern people can’t benefit from this concept, as many of our ancestors did, but only if we can make sense of it for our time. New scientific and historical knowledge is making this possible. We can *re-envision the whole idea of God* so that it can contribute to human cooperation rather than to conflict and doubt. You might wonder, why is this project a good thing? Why not just delete the dangerous and controversial idea of God and let science rule while we perhaps subjectively enjoy the feeling of awe before a beautiful sunset or a starry night? Because humanity is facing potential disaster if smart people simply dismiss the subject and leave it to the religions to define God.

God needs to be redefined, not retired. Finding a way of thinking about God that makes sense to me took many years, and I only stuck with it because I needed to work a recovery program. But doing so has dramatically improved my life and made me realize how my lifelong prejudice against the very word “God” limited both my effectiveness and my self-knowledge. I will not discuss the personal benefits here, though I do so in my book *A God That Could Be Real*. What I want to focus on here is a social reality that hardly anyone is discussing: how our society defines “God” could have enormous impact, for better or worse, on the future of our species and many others.

Science can’t give us a complete big picture. Consider these words from Gus Speth, a founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council and environmental advisor to two Presidents: “I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that with thirty years of good science we could address those problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy...and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation – and we scientists don’t know how to do that.”

No one can solve problems like climate change and mass extinction without science and scientific thinking. We need people to be skeptical and rational and willing to accept the evidence, whatever it may turn out to be, or our descendants could slide backward in fear into the kind of magical cults that always arise in times of crisis. But lack of scientific and technological expertise is not really the problem: the problem is a lack of will to do what we already know how to do; it’s our inability to create widespread agreement to embrace good solutions. More than technological innovation, the world needs innovation in *motivation as a community*. Motivation of this kind used to come through a shared sense of religious transcendence, but the old “transcendent” concepts don’t work anymore, because we know they’re impossible or meaningless. This is why atheists like the old me find it incredible

that anyone could believe in them. But my purpose is not to criticize old beliefs but to present a surprisingly fertile alternative.

In a filmed interview in the 1950s, the great psychologist Carl Jung was asked bluntly, "Does God exist?" He answered, "What I know is that every person has a god-capacity." I was struck by this word. Jung had written that all people have a deep craving for meaning and purpose and belonging. A god-capacity is the innate ability to satisfy that craving with symbols. It's the *ability to find your god*. It's not tied to any particular God or religion or symbol. Religions all provide symbols, but why rely only on theirs? Our god-capacity belongs to us *as humans*, not as members of any religion. What are we doing with this incredibly powerful ability today?

Treadmill religions are keeping people's god-capacities running in place. Believers may feel that they are keeping spiritually fit, but they're not going anywhere -- certainly not into the changing world we actually live in or into the universe that surrounds and fills us. I was an atheist most of my life, and it was a revelation to me to realize that atheism is treadmill philosophy. It's watching the same TV in the gym as the treadmill religion next to it. The main difference is, one thinks it's reality TV, the other knows it's not. But they're watching the same old show.

If we cling to a treadmill view of God *even in order to reject it*, we squander our god-capacity and throw away what may be our greatest power. Our god-capacities are crying out to be used constructively, building not on old legends but on a solid foundation of modern knowledge, in full awareness of our extraordinary place in the cosmos but also our desperate need to come together.

The big picture exists on another size scale. The way to get off those treadmills is to re-envision reality through new knowledge and new metaphors. The most sharable source of eye-opening new metaphors is science, because science is equally true for everyone, so everyone automatically shares it. If we rethink God through scientific metaphors, it liberates our god-capacities while it keeps them accurate.

I am a philosopher of science and have coauthored two books with cosmologist Joel Primack and given over a hundred talks with him about the new picture of the universe and humanity's place in it. I wrote *A God That Could Be Real* based on the understanding that our cosmos is nothing like earlier imaginings, and the corollary is neither are we. Everything astronomers have ever seen with all instruments in all wavelengths of radiation is less than half of one percent of what's out there. The large-scale drama of our universe is the multibillion-year competition between two great invisible presences: dark energy, which is flinging space apart, and dark matter, which is pulling atoms together into galaxies, where they can interact and evolve into worlds. This competition has spun the galaxies into being and created the only possible homes for planets and life. No God could have created this universe, or us. We're not just skin-sealed packages of organs and bones, animated by a soul. We intelligent beings, when viewed from a cosmic perspective, are utterly extraordinary, but until we take that cosmic perspective, our extraordinariness is not visible.

Once we do take a cosmic time perspective, however, we see that we who are alive today are living at a pivotal moment in the entire evolution of our species. For hundreds of thousands of years, the human population grew slowly, but starting about 1800 with the Industrial Revolution, it began to grow exponentially. In the 20th century alone, humanity quadrupled, and now we've shot past 7 billion. Meanwhile, the amount of resources consumed *per person* has also been expanding exponentially. Multiply these trends times each other, and this is not growth but explosion. It cannot go on. The transition to a new state could be abrupt, or perhaps we humans might be able to cooperate widely enough to engineer a soft landing. It matters that we change direction quickly in these final years or perhaps decades of exponential growth, because exponential growth lets new things get started all the time, but afterward many opportunities for change will have disappeared. The generations alive today are riding the crest of a great wave in human history, and how it breaks may shape our descendants' lives for countless generations to come.

We have one chance to do it right, but we don't know how long the window of possibility will stay open. Humanity is unlikely to be wiped out, but the stakes are unimaginably high. If we raise our thinking to the level our challenging times demand – which new knowledge may now permit – we humans collectively might be able to grasp the big picture, understand the stakes, alter the trends, and reset our course for a long future of sustainable justice and creativity. But we'll need every advantage we can conceivably muster, and even that might not be enough. Under these circumstances, how can rational people blithely assume that all will be well if we toss aside our god-capacity and leave the immense power of communal motivation, historically evoked by sharing a God, in the hands of the smallest-minded among us – the science-deniers and the fundamentalists of all religions?

What would benefit everyone far more than proclaiming opposition to straw Gods or watering down the word "God" to some vague feel-good concept is to develop a new way of thinking about the idea of God that can truly *serve* our species in this high-tech, low-understanding, and increasingly dangerous epoch.

We need to rescue the idea of God from religion.

I'm not talking about rescuing the Omnipotent Creator of the Universe. That image is one of the religious concoctions that we need to rescue God *from*. I want to rescue what God stands for – a focus for human aspirations, a transcendent beacon.

Right now the world is failing miserably to cooperate to confront climate change. Treaties alone can't solve the problem, because laws can never compel long term cooperation in the absence of a shared underlying identity or a higher goal that outweighs our competitive instincts and our suspicion of differences. A shared goal must be held sacred or it will not be held long. The only basis for trust that could exist widely enough to ensure cooperation to solve global problems is an inspiring story about ourselves that every human can share and that illuminates our shared identity. Many of today's educated secular citizens, exactly the people we need to lead the change in the disastrous trends, have dismissed the possibility of a globally

sharable, spiritually motivating story, because that kind of lingo is still associated with religious tall tales. But if having such a narrative could make the difference between human survival and extinction, wouldn't it be worth trying? Faced with climate change many people are still turning to traditional thinking like a lamb trying to nurse from its dead mother.

Why should we want to rescue the idea of God? There are certainly arguments on both sides. A passionate feeling about God can motivate people to amazing feats of creativity and bravery, but also, as everyone knows, to denial and depravity. God has been for millions of people the only refuge in lives that are intolerable beyond the imagination of almost anyone reading this, but it can also distort their picture of reality and shut down their minds and even their humanity. A passionate feeling about God has led to wars, injustice, and insane behavior throughout history and clearly still does when misdirected. But it has also given us art and imagination, reverence, sacrifice, community, and above all endurance. Spiritual passion can be abused, but that doesn't mean we don't need it. It means we have to tame it the way our ancestors tamed fire. It *is* our fire. No culture has ever lived without it, and we're unlikely to for long.

What? Is she actually proposing creation of a new God? What could be crazier????? Bear with me. Here's what I'm proposing: that we use our god-capacities to rescue the power and awe evoked by the sense of God and redirect them toward the long term flowering of our species in harmony with the new universe.

I'm not talking about a God that has to be believed in. God can only matter if it's real, the way gravity and culture are real: we don't have to believe in them – we need to understand what they are, and then we can decide to learn more about them or not. The only way to find a God that is real is to look for it *in reality*. This may seem obvious, but apparently it's not.

We've got to crack open our god-capacities! Every conscious human on this planet over the age of three or four has heard of "God". As neuroscientists say, "Neurons that fire together wire together." The idea of God is probably hard-wired in us by now. The challenge for our god-capacities is to figure out what the idea can mean for our time. The question we need to stop asking is, "Does God exist?" That's a sterile distraction, since it's pointless to ask if something undefined exists – or if something defined by impossible characteristics (like omniscience) exists. We instantly get past the issue of existence by starting in reality. If we are interested in a God that is real, the fertile question is, "Could anything exist in the universe – as we now scientifically understand it – that is *worthy* of the name God?" What is truly worthy of that name? What does something have to be to be God? What are the bottom line requirements without which it cannot be God?

It turns out there is something scientifically real that exists wherever there is human society or human artifacts, and it wields enormous influence over our minds, our sense of reality, and all our desires from infancy till death. The way to

understand it is through the concept of “emergence.” An emergent phenomenon is something radically new that comes into existence on a larger size scale from the increasing *complexity of the interactions* among its parts. So for example, from ten thousand clueless ants interacting only with pheromones and the ants nearest them, there emerges an ant *colony* that possesses astonishingly sophisticated abilities that no ant could even imagine, such as constructing an anthill and efficiently allocating resources. The colony is an emergent phenomenon. We ourselves are also emergent phenomena: we are each a “person,” but personhood doesn’t exist in any of our cells; it emerges from the complexity of their interactions making us. The global economy is an emergent phenomenon. From many individual people trading and wanting things, an economy emerges that controls much of our lives and operates according to laws that have to be discovered. The interacting parts that lead to an emergent phenomenon can be emergent phenomena themselves, like us human participants in the emerging global economy. Ant colonies, persons, and the global economy are all real, although they are abstract. Many emergent phenomena emerge from humans acting collectively, such as governments, medicine, artforms, the media. They have immeasurable power over our lives – yet they only exist because of us. Emergence is a two-way street.

There is one emergent phenomenon from humans acting collectively that is far more ancient and powerful than any of these and so ubiquitous that it’s not even recognized. It is the phenomenon emerging from the staggering complexity of all humanity’s *aspirations* interacting. All the other emergent phenomena, from governments and the global economy back through prehistory to tool-making and ritual, are secondary: the root of them all is that people aspired to change something. Without aspirations, we would be nothing but meat with habits.

You might be wondering, are aspirations real enough to spawn an emergent phenomenon? There is nothing more real to us. Everything I want to understand, to be, everything I want to do, every group I want to be part of, everything that drives me or ignites my passion or unlocks my compassion or inspires awe or love is from aspiration. Interacting human aspirations have generated language, including crucial concepts like justice and human rights, which have taken centuries to clarify in meaning. No one could have invented those ideas on their own. Science too is an aspirational activity. And so is not only religious fervor but also atheist attempts to escape religious fervor.

The phenomenon emerging from the ongoing interactions of human aspirations provides the meaningsphere in which we live. Every person raised in human society is directly plugged into it and absorbs language and music and ideas from it as well as hopes, beliefs, and sense of possibility. We are connected through it not only to everyone else on Earth but to our ancestors, whose contributions brought it into existence in the form we encounter it, and to our descendants, who will be affected by how we contribute to it. The emergent phenomenon from human aspirations is our *bridge* to the universe – only through it do we have a meaningful consciousness of the immense history and future of the cosmos and our place and potential in it.

This emergent phenomenon is younger than humanity, or perhaps the same age, so it certainly did not create the universe 13.8 billion years ago – but it created the *meaning* of the universe, which is what matters to us. (The very definition of “matters” is that it means something.) It’s not the King of the Universe; it is a planetary phenomenon. No one created it: it emerged from humanity through laws of nature. There is nothing in existence more godlike to us than this ancient, ever-expanding emergent phenomenon that is present wherever we are. When cultures were small and isolated, they would have each had their emerging god arising from their interacting aspirations, but in the globally interconnected world, one God is emerging for the human species.

Until scientists gave us a theory of complexity and emergence, it was not possible to understand this. Now it’s impossible to ignore it.

The emerging God cannot be humanlike. It’s not male or female, because an emergent phenomenon is radically different from the parts that interact to make it up. It has to be at least as different from us as we are from animals with no self-consciousness, no ideas, no sense of meaning, no archives of knowledge, if you can even imagine being that. We can’t describe what the emerging God is like, but emergence gives us *an origin story* for it – something no monotheistic religion offers. We can now understand how and when God could have come into existence. For me, a God whose nature is mysterious but which I know is nevertheless real, is far more attractive than a God whose nature can be described in excruciating theological detail but which doesn’t exist.

Must this emergent phenomenon be called God? No. But it’s real and needs a name. Without a solid idea of God, the word will be left to the prescientific imagination to define in scientifically impossible, humanly destructive ways, as it so often is today. If, on the other hand, we rescue God from the religions this way, we can *use* it not only to re-envision the world but to enjoy a deep personal connection to something real that is surely greater than we are.

Let’s compare this view to atheism. Which is more likely to unite us to help humanity’s cosmic adventure avoid tragedy? Which perspective will help us rise to the all-too-real tasks before us? Our descendants could have billions of years on this planet and elsewhere in the galaxy if we can get into harmony with the real universe soon. If we can only connect.

One reviewer of *A God That Could Be Real* wrote, “Abrams has no right to redefine God. God is supernatural.” No, God does not have to be supernatural. God can be real. I’m not saying God is *reality*, equivalent to everything that exists and has existed for at least 13.8 billion years. I’m saying that God is a special phenomenon happening here on Earth that may be only a hundred thousand years old and will disappear if our descendants die out. The solar system will keep orbiting the center of the galaxy, but it won’t be a “galaxy” anymore or a solar “system” or an “orbit,” because all concepts will have disappeared.

Some critics have said I'm just playing with words, inventing a God by renaming a collection of aspirations God. But they have missed the key point: *emergent phenomena are not collections*. An emergent phenomenon is something utterly new and unpredicted that arises *from* the collective – actually from the increasing complexity of interactions within the collective. The emergent phenomenon exists just as surely as do the members of the collective.

If we choose to see God this way, we gain the invaluable possibility of a coherent big picture for our time. Most people will never accept a big picture that leaves out God, yet the rest of us will never accept a God that violates the laws of nature. But a real God lifts up our thinking to reveal our globally shared identity. It's rooted in a shared origin story and a shared sense of the immense potential future of our species, and it's energized by a transcendent beacon that illuminates our aspirations out to the far reaches of the future. What could be more valuable? Today's pivotal moment will not last a thousandth of one degree of a single orbit around the Milky Way, but what we do during it could affect the entire future of our planet and its lifeforms.

Over vast stretches of time, as ever more complex interactions of our ancestors' aspirations, purposes, and cultural achievements merge with our own, with those of future children and grandchildren, and onward through our distant humanoid descendants, an ever more astonishing God will be emerging, forever shape-shifting in infinite ways, expanding the reality of future generations, yet always personally connected to every single individual. From this humble beginning on Earth, we humans could spread the seed of intelligence throughout the galaxy. In the biblical story of the burning bush, Moses asks God His name, and God responds, "I am becoming what I am becoming." The emerging God is becoming what it is becoming. Its future depends on what we humans do – and our future may depend on recognizing it.